

The Jump by L. Borealis

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Humor, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-03-11 05:21:13

Updated: 2019-09-02 23:23:46

Packaged: 2019-12-12 17:28:05

Rating: T

Chapters: 8

Words: 77,611

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Wherein El Hopper, secret telekinetic skydiving instructor meets Mike Wheeler, a terrified 25th birthday boy on his first skydiving jump. Also known as a mega random meet-cute no one ever asked for!

1. Chapter 1

Hi lovelies! This one shot you might have read in the spring is now going to be a full fic. Enjoy!

She had finally convinced her father to let her give it a try on her sixteenth birthday. From that day on, it had become her main unflinching obsession.

Skydiving was unlike anything else on Earth.

It allowed her to fly.

No. Really.

Fly.

Crashing through the sky alone was the only time that El Hopper was able to truly be herself, bending the molecules in the air around her to do anything she wanted. It afforded her a freedom she couldn't experience anywhere else in life. It was the one place where she could fully embrace her secret with the unbridled intensity she desired.

Life had fallen into place like a stack of dominos after that first jump, and almost ten years later she found herself at the helm, jumping almost every day with endless tandem newbies strapped to her chest. It wasn't a common profession for a slight woman of 5' 4". But, then again, El Hopper wasn't exactly a common girl.

And, like almost every Saturday morning, that's where El found herself off to on this early May morning.

El sighed as she honked her car horn for the fourth time, desperately hoping Max would finally respond. They were running very close to late. Finally, Max's red pony tailed whipped into view from behind her apartment door.

"I am so hungover, I hope I don't wretch on my tandem," Max groaned as she flung her body into the passenger seat of El's car.

"Why do I keep drinking Jager?"

"Because you keep not listening to me," El quipped as she rolled her eyes. "Here, I got you breakfast."

She handed the beat up girl beside her a croissant sandwich and a cup of coffee.

Max sighed in contentment as she allowed herself to sink into El's passenger seat as El hit the road. "What would I do without you, Ellie?"

"At this point, I have no idea," El replied with a laugh as she pulled out of the driveway and took her regular route to the airfield.

"So, what kind of assholes are we jumping today?" Max asked, her mouth full of breakfast sandwich.

"I swear, I don't know how you got a job dealing with people," El teased.

"Honestly, me either. But then again, you hired me. So, I guess you're the one that will have to answer to that," Max replied sarcastically. "Oh, I hope it's cute boys. That always makes the day go by faster"

El snickered, "You always hope it's cute boys."

"Of course I do."

"Well, I took a look at the reservation this morning. It's four guys in their mid twenties so maybe you'll get lucky," El supplied, side eyeing her coworker with a smirk.

"Score, I hope they're girly screamers. That's my favorite."

El rolled her eyes. "You are such a sadist."

"Guilty as charged," Max said with a serious nod as she took a big bite of her breakfast sandwich and moaned almost indecently at the taste.

El pulled up to the gate about ten minutes later and flashed the guard her access pass, pulling them through to the prep area. Prep took a

little extra time that morning, what with Max dragging ass, and they were only just ready to go as the car carrying their clients for the morning jump pulled up.

A handsome black man was in the driver's seat, next to a curly haired guy who was talking animatedly, his hands bouncing through the air as he explained something she couldn't hear. In the back were two more men, and El's eyes strayed to a brunette that she realized he was blind folded.

She groaned.

Surprised sky divers were the worst. She really needed to add a clause in the contract discouraging it. The last time she jumped with a surprised birthday girl she was pretty sure she ruined birthdays for the girl for the rest of her life. The girl had cried the entire time and run away the second she had been released her from the harness.

The men exited the car as she put on her most friendly professional face and waved in their direction. The curly haired man held his finger to his lips before he turned to the blindfolded one.

"Ok, Mike. Are you ready?" he chimed.

"I swear to God, this is so unnecessary. I hate surprises. You know I hate surprises," the tall guy she now knew as Mike grumbled behind his blindfold.

"You'll love this surprise," the man from the driver's seat encouraged. "Will, take off his blindfold."

In reply, Will reached up and took off Mike's blindfold as he encouragingly said, "No really, you're going to love it."

Mike's eyes opened, and fell directly on El.

...He didn't speak.

...And neither did she.

She wasn't sure she knew how.

Something about how his deep dark eyes had locked onto hers had rendered her voice utterly useless. It was instant, the goosebumps that shot straight down her body trapped in his gaze.

"Um..." he stuttered, his gaze unwavering from hers.

"Dude! She's not your surprise. Look around you," the curly haired one said as he shook his head and the boys all laughed directly at Mike.

Mike blinked, finally breaking the eye contact that she had just been lost in. He looked around him for the first time. And then, he blanched.

"No! No no no no no. I told you guys I didn't want to do this," he protested as he instantly tried to get back into car.

"Oh, no you don't!" The man from the driver's seat countered. "You've always wanted to do this. You said so last week, even."

The curly haired one then jumped to the task before Mike could protest any further. "Hi, I'm Dustin. It's Mike's 25th birthday. As you can see, he's difficult. You're in charge here?"

"Yeah, that's me," El said, highly embarrassed to find that her voice was struggling to work. She resolutely tried to keep her eyes on Dustin and did not let them drift behind him.

"Lucas," the man from the driver's seat said suddenly, making her jump as he walked up and held out his hand to introduce himself. "And this is Will, and our birthday boy, Mike."

El shook each of their hands, stopping on Mike last.

"Happy Birthday," she said as she neared him and held out her hand in greeting.

"Thank you," he replied, his grip firm and lingering.

"I can guarantee you it's not as scary as you think it is," she said, pushing herself to sound as professionally kind as she could muster. "Plus, you'll be strapped to me and I've jumped out of a plane

hundreds of times without any incident."

"I'll be strapped to you?" He asked in surprise, his voice raising an octave in an instant.

"Unless you'd rather go tandem with Max," she said, pointing over her shoulder to the red head sorting equipment. "But she's not as nice as me."

"No, no. You're fine," Mike stuttered.

A peal of laughter echoed behind her from the boys, coupled with Dustin hiding his face in his hand and muttering, "Oh my god, Mike," under his breath, but still loud enough to hear her.

Keep is professional, Hopper.

"Okay," she said as she clapped her hands together and surveyed the group, pulling their attention. "Are we ready to get started?"

"Yes!"

"Yeah!"

"Let's go!"

"...yes?"

El turned on her heel and waved them to follow her. Max looked up as they approached and waved. "Hi, I'm Max. Everybody pick up a gear bag and meet me by that plane over there, then we'll handle paperwork and go over the basics," she said as she hoisted two into her arms and headed for small silver plane off to the left.

"Oh god, that plane has propellers," a shaky voice grimaced behind her. She turned around to find Mike, pale, as he looked at the tiny plane. El held up her hand for him to slow down while she let the others follow Max.

"Afraid of flying?" She asked.

Mike avoided her eyes, a blush rising to his cheeks. "I feel like a huge

baby admitting this to a professional sky diver, but yes."

"Mike," she said, causing his eyes to dart directly to hers as she said his name. "I understand. It's okay. You don't have to do this, it's not for everybody. But I can guarantee you that if do decide to go ahead with this, the plane is safe and you're in good hands. Tandem is easy. Really, all you have to do is trust me and I'll do the rest. I promise."

Mike was quiet for a moment as he looked at her. The fear radiating in his eyes just a second earlier began to simmer and was replaced with the disarming gaze he had bestowed upon her when his blindfold had come off.

"You promise?" he said quietly.

"Yes. I promise," she replied with a nod.

"Okay," he said after a second. "I trust you."

"Smart man," El said with a smirk as she turned back around and led the way to the plane, happy for a moment to let the blush wear off of her cheeks.

What the hell kind of a thing to say was that? What she... flirting? What was happening?

She shook it off as they reached the plane. El scaled the steps and crawled into the hull.

She greeted her pilot and her other two tandem instructors as she straightened up and pointed for Mike to take a seat. He was tall enough that he had to hunch slightly to do so.

"Okay, everybody strap in and let's begin."

El quickly fell into her daily routine, walking the guys through her safety and procedure schpeel as the pilot began to start the plane. She was grateful for the rote procedure as it helped her mind recover from the unexpected sensations that kept assaulting her out of absolutely nowhere.

The mood was extra jovial as they went through the process, filled

with jokes and banter, all unique to the group of friends that seemed to know each other insanely well.

Despite her attempts, her eyes kept gravitating back to Mike. He had calmed down considerably, and was even joining in with his friends on the jokes and light hearted banter.

God he has the best smile.

After walking them through the safety procedures and handling the final paperwork, she and the other trainers paired off with their tandems to strap everyone up and get the flight off of the ground.

"So, how does this work?" Mike asked as she held the vest open for him to slip it on.

"Basically, you wear this, and then I will hook onto these back here," she said, pulling on the apparatus. "So, I'll be strapped to your back and I'll be in charge of everything. Your only jobs are to let yourself fall and not accidentally punch me in the face."

"I think I can manage that," he replied with a smile as he turned back around and zipped up the vest. She checked each of his restraints, right up close to his body while she did so. A heady sensation came over her that made it hard for her to do her safety check properly.

"You've done hundreds of jumps?" He asked softly, his voice almost in her ear as she checked the harness tightness at his shoulder.

"Mhmm" El replied as she forced herself to keep her eyes on her work. "Passed about 900 a couple months ago. I've been jumping for almost 10 years."

"Oh wow, that's awesome," he said quietly.

El smiled in reply and snuck a glance up. "You think so?"

Mike shrugged in reply. "Yeah, I've never even so much as jumped from a rooftop, let alone a plane. So, this is a big leap for me..."

El giggled despite herself. "...No pun intended, I'm sure."

"No..." he said slowly, his voice went a bit quiet as he rolled his eyes at himself. "That pun was definitely intended..."

"Well, it was a good one," she lied reassuringly.

"Oh, thanks," Mike said with a bit of surprise. She looked up to find his face yet again slightly flushed as he looked away from her.

He was such a dork.

Like, a huge dork.

...why was it so adorable?

"Okay, take a seat and strap in, we'll take off in a minute," she said suddenly as she backed away from Mike and forced the subject change to get her brain back on track once again.

Mike nodded and did as she asked. She suited herself up quickly, testing her equipment in a practiced fashion before signaling to the pilot that everyone was ready to go.

As the plane took off, El let her eyes scan the hull of the plane. The rest of Mike's friends seemed immensely excited as they began their ascent. Max was sitting beside her tandem, Lucas, cracking jokes with him in way that seemed like they knew each other. The flight up was smooth and uneventful as she talked the group through what to expect, final considerations, and a brief pep talk, all the while distractingly aware of the raven haired man who's knee was touching hers in the cramped quarters.

And finally, much to her relief, they were there, in the sky, at altitude, ready to fly.

"Okay everyone, a quick flight up and then a quicker flight down!" She called.

The hull erupted in cheers, with the exception of one subtle groan to her right.

She looked over to find Mike once again looking pale.

"You still want to do this?" she asked.

Mike shut his eyes tight for a moment and breathed in a steadied way. After a moment his eyes reopened. He looked down on her and nodded.

"Yeah, I think I should do this," he said, almost to himself. He ventured a glance at her quickly before he looked away, something hiding in his eyes.

"Okay," she said hesitantly, somehow completely unbothered by his latest spike of tension. "If that's what you want. You're in safe hands. It'll be over before you know it."

"Thanks, El," he replied with a tight smile.

El felt her heart thump hard as he uttered her name, and she was immensely grateful as the other trainers became to move through the hull in order to prepare for the by one the boys fell from the plane until it was just El and Mike alone in the hull. With each drop of his friends she could feel his tension edging to a new plateau.

"Okay, you ready?" El asked softly into his ear as Will's exuberant scream could be heard leaving the hull. He jumped in surprise as his eyes shot in her direction and she fought back a gasp. They were desperately close.

"I'm as ready as you can make me" he said quietly; his voice hoarse.

El worked to handle the final restraints and positioned herself behind him, aware of his shaking as he seemed to accept his fate. El must have lost her mind, because at that moment she reached around and took his hand quickly, squeezing it as she brought them close to the open door. "Alright. It's our turn!" she called to him as the wind began to assault his shaggy hair, flinging it against her goggles. "If it gets to be too much just squeeze my hand and close your eyes, okay?!"

"Okay..."

El connected the final latch of their safety harnesses with surprisingly shaky fingers.

"Alright," she cried, almost laughing at their now obvious height difference as her job became cumbersome. "You okay?"

"Um..."

"I promised you you could trust me," she said, pulling herself up on her tiptoes and bringing her lips close to his ear to ensure he could hear her, "So trust me."

"I trust you. I don't really trust myself right now," he replied as she peered out of the open door, the wind lapping his hair dangerously.

"Well, luckily you don't have to," she said as she pulled him back against her, ready to jump. "I've got you."

"Oh...kay."

"Alright. Here we go."

He grabbed her hand instantly, making her flinch; the contact feeling so wholly intimate in a way no other dive ever had, and they hadn't even jumped yet. She tightened her hand around his on instinct.

"On three! 1 - 2 - Happy Birthday, Mike!"

She pushed them out of the hull.

She was pretty sure he broke her hand as he squeezed, their bodies together in a free fall through the sky.

"HOLY SHIT HOLY FUCK OH MY GOD"

"You're okay! It's almost over already, just relax!"

And shockingly, he listened.

What followed was one of the best jumps of her life. Over the course of 30 seconds he went from a terror to pure exhilaration.

"THIS IS AMAZING!"

"RIGHT?! I TOLD YOU!"

Despite the shift in his fear, as it melted from terror to exaltation, he did not let go of her hand. His fingers had interlaced with hers somewhere along the way, and they pressed down with a firmness that trapped her in his grasp. Yet, instead of fighting for her fingers back, she pulled his hand out away from them so he could fully feel the free fall through the air.

His hair whipped against her face, raven black strands chopping up the scenery of the sky in her view.

"YOU GOOD?"

"I'M AWESOME!" he replied, pumping her hand in reply.

Her heart swooped, completely without the assistance of the gravity pulling them down.

Gravity.

At that moment she was assaulted by sudden dangerous urge. One that came out of nowhere. One that had never once triggered on any of the hundreds of tandems she had jumped.

Don't do it.

Don't do it.

"Want to try something?" She yelled across his ear as her body took control over her mind completely against her will.

"Anything!" He called back.

She swallowed hard, her blood boiling in nervousness and instant regret... as she cut out the gravity.

"What the fuck?!" He yelled as they shot upward.

"I know right?! Just gotta know how to maneuver it!" She lied.

There's no way he would ever know, right?

She took Mike on a mini version of her solo flight.

She had never shared this sensation with another soul. She'd never even told anyone about it.

She had no idea how she'd lost her control and shared it with him.

Yet, she didn't think about it in that moment.

Because it was glorious.

And from the tone clear in his yelling voice, he absolutely loved it.

She cut it off quicker than she would have liked in order to avoid suspicion, and instead, pulled the parachute.

They buoyed in the air, and she felt him let out a breath he'd seemed to have been holding, his words a jumble of adrenalin.

"That was fucking amazing! This is fucking amazing! You're fucking amazing!" His voice screamed through the air.

El's breath caught at his final words as their fall took the air of the parachute, making them glide.

"So you like skydiving?!" She cried as she noticed her hand still pinned in his.

"This is the best Birthday of my life!"

El's vision landed on the back of his head, calling to her as their slow fall became more controlled with the parachute. She didn't know what the hell she was doing, and she felt like a major creep, but that didn't seem to stop her from dropping her forehead to lie down momentarily against the nape of his neck.

He leaned back into her.

"Okay," she said into his ear, no need to yell too loudly as her lips were almost touching his ear. "We're going to hit the ground soon. So lean back into me as we get close, and right as you're about to touch the ground, make like you're running and we'll have a smooth landing."

"You got it!" He cried back excitedly.

And while he did exactly as she asked , the landing was anything but smooth. His lanky frame plus their height differences made for a hard rolling land into the dirt.

El's laughter echoed through her ears as she splayed half on her back on the ground, the wind knocked out of her lungs, connected awkwardly to Mike who was pushing her deeper into the ground. She worked quickly to release him from the harness and attempted and failed to catch her breath as she laid back into the dirt.

"Holy shit that was amazing." He said, breathless and panting, as he rolled onto his stomach and placed his face to the ground.

"Good first jump?" She asked through heaving breaths as she worked her way up onto her elbow and leaned toward him.

He looked up at her, his body less than an inch away from hers, glee shooting through all of his features as he nodded vigorously.

And then she froze as Mike did the least expected thing she'd ever experienced in her life.

With a swiftness that made her miss his movements, he leaned in against her and searingly kissed her full on the mouth.

El melted without warning into the grass below, her body giving way to him on instinct as if something deep inside simply surrendered. His lips, dry from the wind, shot shocked sparks throughout every corner of her body as he leaned against her on the ground.

He pulled away after a moment, his eyes glazed two inches from her face. Deep pools of dark light boring into hers. He exhaled in an overwhelmed huff, rustling her hair against her cheek.

"Wha-" she breathed as she stared at him blankly in astonishment.

And with that, Mike blinked. And when his eyes reopened they were filled with an instant and real terror. He jarringly jumped to his feet.

"Oh my god I'm so sorry I'm so hopped up on adrenaline and you're

so pretty and that was so amazing and, I mean, how did you do that in the air, how did we fly up?! Oh my god, I'm...I'm so sorry. Stuff like that has to happen all the time, right? Like, I'm not the first adrenaline addled person to kiss their trainer in thank you, am I? Oh my god." He buried his head in his hands.

"Um... You might be the first..." El said, breathless, her eyes wide, her body still on the ground, the feeling of his lips still coursing through her veins with more delicious intensity than she had felt during a jump through the sky.

"Fuck, I am so sorry," he grimaced as he turned away.

"It's okay...I... I liked it."

I liked it?!

What kind of crazy alternate reality El had taken over her fucking mouth?

"Oh..." was all Mike said in reply as he shifted back around quickly and looked at her in complete surprise.

El felt her face flush scarlet as she forced herself roughly to break eye contact and scrambled to her feet to collect the parachute. "Okay. Umm... let's get back to the others!" she stuttered quickly, not looking at him as she began to cross the field at full mortified speed.

Mike followed her wordlessly as they left the field and quickly joined the others in a pickup location.

"Dude that was awesome!" Will called to Mike as he arrived. "You survived!"

"I uh..." Mike stumbled over his words. "I better than survived. That was the best five minutes of my life."

"Yeah, man!" Dustin called from behind them, running to join them.

They waited for a long moment before a rustling occurred to their left and Lucas and Max came out from behind a large pile of brush. Lucas looked like his dog had died.

"I don't want to talk about this ever again," he barked as he joined the others. Max's smirk told El that she couldn't wait to tell her that story.

El went through the rest of the motions in a daze, so much so that Max ended up leading the trip back to the airfield and their car.

She couldn't get her mind off what had just happened. His eyes. His smile. The feeling of his fingers entwined tightly with hers. The fact that she still found him so engaging though he had started as a complete scaredy cat. Whatever had possessed her actually fly with him. That fucking kiss...

"Well, I hope you had a good time, guys. Especially you, Lucas," Max said with a tease as they reached the end point and began to say their goodbyes.

Lucas grimaced and nodded curtly in return as he bee lined for the car, making the other guys laugh out loud.

Mike crossed through the small crowd toward El as Will and Dustin spoke to their instructors.

"I know I was probably the weirdest tandem you've ever had," he said sheepishly, avoiding her eyes. "So thank you for dealing with me."

"You definitely were but... it was fun," she replied quietly, her professional voice completely checked out and nowhere to be found.

"Uh...okay. That's good, then," he said with a nervous laugh. After a second he seemed to chance a glance up and caught her eye, but he didn't say anything else.

"Um..." she stuttered with growing nervousness. "Happy Birthday. And if you uh... if ever want to jump again, you know where to find me."

Mike nodded, a glint in his eye. "I'll do that."

He looked at her one last time, and in that moment she attempted to send him a signal, any signal to keep him talking, to get him to stay, to... anything. It was a desperate calling that shot from somewhere

within her that she couldn't explain. But instead, he simply waved goodbye, turned around, and crawled into the back seat of the car parked by the curb with his friends.

El let out a heavy breath, and her heart fell to a shocking degree as she watched the car start up and drive away.

"What. The fuck. Was that?" Max questioned, suddenly by her side, with a tone laced with her intent to dig for gossip.

El simply sighed. "He kissed me after we landed."

"Oh my GOD!" Max exclaimed. "That's a new one."

"I know."

"Did you like it?" she asked, leaning into their new secret.

El looked over to her friend, certain that her eyes would betray her if she tried to lie. So instead, she chose truth.

"I loved it," she admitted with a breathless blush.

"Ellie!" Max squealed. "Did you get his number?"

"...Nope. I left that up to him. It... didn't happen." she replied, trying to keep the dejection out of her voice.

"Oh," Max said with a hint of disappointment. She was silent for a moment before she changed the subject, for which El was eternally grateful. "That Lucas guy screamed like a little girl the whole way down. I thought he was going to give himself a heart attack."

El laughed. "So, you're favorite kind of jump, huh?"

"Oh, absolutely. It was fucking hilarious. I think I made it worse for him because I couldn't keep in my laughter."

"There goes our Yelp rating. Thanks, Max"

Max rolled her eyes, "Did you -"

But at that moment a car, one that she had just seen leave,

reappeared around the bend, driving fast until it stopped abruptly at the curb.

Mike jumped out, his lanky body making hard work of the small back door.

El's heart jumped.

"Did you forget something?" She asked.

"Yeah," he stated breathlessly, his eyes nervous. "I forgot to get your number."

"Oh, Smoooooooooth..." Max breathed quietly beside El.

"That is..." he continued as he scratched the nape of his neck, "If you'd be willing to give -"

"Yes." El interjected immediately as she hurriedly fished for her card from her jacket pocket. She handed him her business card and pointed to the last number. "This is my cell. Use that."

"Okay," he said as he sucked on his bottom lip and looked at the card in his hand. "I'll um... I'll call you, uh... El Hopper, Head Skydiving Instructor."

"Okay," she replied without hesitation, a traitorous smile tugging against her lips.

Mike was silent for a moment before he looked back up, his deep dark eyes on hers one last time, completely rendering her speechless. For the slightest of moments, the nervousness that had flooded through him was completely gone, and in its place a genuine sincerity filled his eyes. It was one she had sensed all along, but now, in full view, it took her breath away.

"Thank you again for the best five minutes of my life."

"Right back at ya," she breathed in instant reply.

Mike blinked, obviously unsure what she meant by that.

Did she know what she meant by that?

She did.

Holy shit wow... She absolutely did know what she meant by that.

"Bye, El," he said slowly, not moving at all despite his words.

"Bye Mike," she replied shakily.

"Yeah... bye..." he said one last time, bewitched as he backed up the car and crawled back in. "I'll... I'll call you."

She let out a tiny wave as he slammed the door to the the car and it left the curb.

Max squealed through a boasting laugh as the car disappeared for a second time out of the parking lot. "Whoa. That is the most love at first sight shit I have ever seen. And I watch way too many romance movies."

"That is the most love at first sight shit I've ever felt." El replied without thought, her filter long since gone.

"Ooh Hopper, you are a goner."

"Yeah," she breathed, her head still swimming. "I think I am."

So, here we go! This is my first AU ever so I think this is going to be a fun time! I'd likely expect an 8 chapter fic from this, light and fun with a little bit of mystery and angst.

2. Chapter 2

Woo! We're here! It just took six months for chapter two, but never fear! This is my main project now, so expect a new chapter every couple of weeks. Thanks everyone for the awesome response to chapter 1! If you like this, and you want more Mileven between my chapters, come hang out and talk with me on Tumblr: dancingskygreen.

And now, onto chapter 2.

"Okay, spill it."

El jumped in surprise as she looked over at her friend and remembered where she was. The serenity of the hiking trail on a cloudy Monday afternoon had lulled her mind, yet again, back to where it had been for too many days.

Max had stopped dead in her tracks. Her dusty shoes were dug into the ground in a stance that El knew from experience could only spell trouble. She had that glint in her eye.

She was about to pry.

"What?" El asked defensively.

Max huffed in amusement and crossed her arms over her chest as she cocked her eyebrow in El's direction. "Don't play me like that, Hopper. You know you're acting weird."

El rolled her eyes. "No, I'm not," she said with a hint of derision as she made an attempt to continue to walk. Max's hand, however, was too fast. She caught El's elbow in a quick trap.

"Listen," Max said, softer this time. "You know you can tell me when something's wrong, right? I was nice and I didn't bring it up all weekend at work. But, you've been acting weird for a few days, whether you want to admit it or not."

El squirmed uncomfortably in her friend's grasp as she felt the truth

begin to bubble up from the depths of her gut.

"It's stupid," she grumbled quietly, her eyes squarely trained on her feet as they scuffed into the wood chips of the trail.

"Okay," Max replied with a wry tone of surety. "So this is about that guy last weekend."

"Why would you think that?" El asked instantly, defense lacing her words in a way that she knew was too thick.

And in that moment, as she heard her own voice echo back through her ears, it hit her.

The jig was up.

El sighed as her shoulders slumped down even further than they had been in the last few days. It had been a silly thought, to think that fresh air and a casual hang out with a friend could lift her spirits enough to help her brain let it go. Yet, the hike hadn't stopped her from glancing at her phone every fifteen minutes, just like she had done all weekend, just as she had done the entire week before, in a desperate attempt to see if she had miraculously received the message she had been pining for... for nine days...

Nine. Days.

El couldn't bring herself to admit how many hundreds of times she had checked her phone in the past week and a half. It had started innocently enough. Quick glances at her screen whenever she had a chance, each flash of her eyes chased by a fleeting smile on her lips, all of it brimming with confident and bubbly anticipation. Completely sure that the next time she looked, he'd be there. His words or a voicemail staring back at her.

Yet, the days passed. And no message appeared.

Slowly, the anticipation had devolved into hesitation. And with it, the swooping sensation in her stomach had slowly turned into acid in her chest. A stinging concoction that shot through her body with sickening sparks every time she peeked at her screen.

Then, at one week? The dread appeared. Thick and embarrassing, and caked with self loathing.

And now? Nine days later? There was nothing much left other than pure edgy defeat.

It must have been the adrenalin.

While he was likely the most extreme case she had ever seen, it wasn't the first time that El had witnessed bizarre antics after a jump. People were beautifully raw after such an exhilarating experience. She'd seen people laugh for minutes on end. She'd seen people cry into the ground with awe. One girl even screamed into the air as she beat on her chest like King Kong.

Adrenaline was a hell of a drug.

Yet still, no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't shake it.

It had felt like... *more than that*.

His wind burnt lips, rushed and careless, as they sparked with an intensity that made her simply melt into the ground. His soft hand in hers, tight and warm and present in both his terror *and* his exhilaration. That glow in the depths of his eyes that seemed to speak to her without words, from that very first moment when their had gazes locked, when their feet had still been firmly planted on the ground.

It must have just been the adrenalin, though.

That must have been why he hadn't called...

...in nine days.

It was all for the best, though, El repeated silently for the hundredth time, as she felt the rush of it all coalesce into her veins once again. She knew, as always, that it was better left forgotten.

Frankly, it had been a terrible idea for her to give him her number at all.

Because, though she loathed to admit it to herself: his presence? It had somehow made her lose control. It had somehow made her spin them *directly up into the air* when the only natural way of the universe was for them to plummet *down*. It was a careless, reckless, and jaw dropping mistake. One borne out of a peculiar sensation that knocked her just a little bit too senseless... the feeling of his hand firmly laced with hers.

Up until that day, El believed that there were two things that she was an expert at: Skydiving. And hiding the truth.

It was rule number one, after all. And it had been that way since her father had taken her in when she was thirteen. Absolutely no one was to know and El had always understood why. She had always known the risks and taken them very seriously. So, as a matter of habit, she had never once so much as even slipped the lock to a door to make it easier when she was with friends, or undone her shoelaces with a simple flick of her head.

And when it was a matter of life or death? She'd handled herself as best she could.

Sure, there had been some necessary trip ups here and there throughout the years. Hubristic heroics that were clearly ill advised. There was the malfunctioning plane she had helped land in her early diving days, when she'd been only seventeen or eighteen. There'd been the random car she'd stopped from careening into a huge tree on her dad's remote acreage in the woods of Central Indiana when she was twenty-one. Then there'd been just the past summer when she'd witnessed a baby carriage escape down the hill toward a busy road, rolling so fast that the baby's father could not keep up in time to save it on his own.

Those few breeches of her rule, though? They'd been undetectable, untraceable, and worth it. Each one a matter of life or death.

What they *hadn't* been was a flagrant unmasking of her true self with a stranger as she fell with him through the air.

So, clearly? This was all *very much* for the best.

...but it didn't make it hurt any less.

"Earth to Ellie!"

El jumped as she returned from the depths of her mind once again to find Max standing in front of her on the trail. The look in Max's eyes was strikingly clear. There was no getting around this without an explanation.

And, frankly? Maybe admitting it was what she needed to do.

El cleared her throat and darted her eyes away from her friend. "He didn't call," she finally admitted quietly.

"Asshole. What a stupid idiot," Max said without missing a beat. "You are clearly so far out of his league, anyway. He probably realized that and got scared. Do you want me to kick his ass?"

El snickered despite herself. "I don't know how you'd find him. He vanished into thin air."

"Oh, that's easy." Max said as she waved her hand dismissively. "I'd call his friend who booked the jump. You know, get his contact information, show up at his house, kick his stupid ass and move along with my day. I'd do that for you, Ellie," Max said with a seriousness that was to be believed. "I mean it. You just say the word."

"Please don't do that," El replied with a grimace. "But I appreciate the offer."

"If you insist," Max said with a dramatic sigh. "You do realize, though, that you *were* completely out of his league?"

El couldn't help but roll her eyes. "Why do you think that?"

"Really?" Max scoffed as she dropped her arms and resumed their walk. "He was shaking like a leaf the entire time. I have no idea how someone like him had the courage to even kiss you like that! Plus, nose was too big."

"Max!" El exclaimed. "That's rude. He was cute. He was... really cute."

"Why are you defending the prick who didn't call you?" Max interjected with a light bump of her shoulder.

El sighed, instantly dejected by Max's words. "I... I don't know."

Max rubbed her hand caringly on El's arm. "Listen, Ellie. You're amazing. Like, a complete catch. And you deserve someone who will actually *call* when they say they'll call. Okay?"

"I know..." El said quietly, surprised at how much her voice quivered on the words.

Max sighed and tightened her arm around her friend's shoulders. The two walked in silence for a few moments as El allowed herself to relax against Max's embrace.

"Listen," Max finally said. "I know that you don't date much, which is ridiculous because you're a fox, but just..."

"I date!" El retaliated defensively.

Max threw her a look. "When was the last time you went out on an *actual* date? And I'm not talking about the last time some guy tried to pick you up and you turned him down."

"It was... last... last fall?" El replied tentatively.

"No. It wasn't," Max corrected. "It was last **LAST** fall. It's been a year and a half."

El blinked in surprise. "Really?"

"You know I'm right."

El grimaced yet again, the math making a depressing amount of sense. "Fine."

"How about this?" Max said, with a sudden jolt of positivity in her voice. "Let's go out tonight and you can put this behind you. We'll go to a bar, at least two guys will flirt with you, like always, because you're a fox, and you'll turn both of them down, like always, no matter how much I tell you not to, because you're insanely picky, and

we'll just have a good time. Okay?"

El rolled her eyes and shook her head, but she couldn't help the smile that Max elicited from her.

"Under one condition," El said.

Max looked over at El, stopped dead in her tracks, and instantly sneered.

"No," Max said firmly.

"Please?" El pouted jokingly. "I'm so sad. It'll cheer me up."

"Please, no!" Max begged back with a disgusted whimper.

El squared her shoulders in reply. "Do you want me to go out with you tonight? If you do, this is the only way. Plus, I haven't made you go for at least a year."

Max closed her eyes tight as if the compromise was physically painful for her. "You're not even good at it!" She exclaimed. "No offense El, but we come in last every single time unless you get endless questions about rom coms and comic books! Why do you even enjoy it?"

"Because I learn something new every time!" El retaliated emphatically. "What, you don't like learning?"

Max scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Listen, I respect the fact that you love learning. Its cute and you're and adorable dork. But leave that for your Planet Earth documentaries, please? Bars aren't for learning. They're for getting drunk."

"First off, don't you ever talk down on Sir David Attenborough!" El replied in a solid mocking threat. "That man has shown me the world. And you can get drunk all you want tonight, but I'm not going out unless we go to trivia."

"Uuuuuuggggghhhh...." Max growled dramatically. "Fiiiine, we'll go to trivia. But, I am getting you drunk."

"Deal," El replied as a tiny smile widened on her lips. "Drunk trivia where we lose every round it is."

It was unbelievable how many times Mike had found himself in this exact position in the last week and a half. Phone in one hand. Small piece of slowly deteriorating cardstock in the other. Shaking fingers and shortened breath and piles of self doubt in between.

Why was this so hard?

Probably because you ruined the best five minutes of your adult life by being a complete and total creep, Wheeler.

He was of two minds about what had happened.

One was exuberant. Intoxicated. Overwhelmed. It sloshed through his stomach with an exceedingly rare and electric intensity.

The other mind? The other mind was *horrified*.

Who the FUCK would kiss a stranger like that?

Mike groaned as the bubbling anticipation in his stomach flopped to shame, yet again, as it had a thousand times in the last nine days.

The truth was, he had *felt* something. And it was something he wasn't sure he had ever even felt before.

The girl, El, she had seemed almost... *electric*. From the moment his eyes had first landed on her, he couldn't shake the sensation that energy seemed to pulsate beneath her skin, radiating from her in a way that made her seem to glow.

She seemed more alive, and more real, than anyone he had ever seen in his life.

God, he sounded like such a sap.

Still, that didn't answer the question:

Who the FUCK would kiss a stranger like that?

Mike sighed in frustration and dropped El Hopper's business card onto his desk. His glasses clacked beside it as he roughly pushed them off of his face and dropped his head into his hands.

He didn't deserve her phone number! It was as simple as that! He couldn't believe he'd even gone back to ask for it in the first place. It had been Dustin who had insisted that they turn back around. For, once Mike had gotten in the car he'd made another huge mistake. And *that* mistake was telling the guys that he'd kissed her. Before he knew it, the car had turned around and barreled him straight back to where she still stood.

Everything about that hour had been a delirious blur. His brain had stopped working in its normal pattern. He'd been all feeling and no thought.

And the party? His friends who had known him almost his entire life? They'd been ecstatic.

Because they hadn't seen that Mike in years.

And frankly? Neither had he.

For one glorious hour, the Mike Wheeler who lived by numbers and formulas and facts, the Mike Wheeler who strayed away from noises that were too loud, steps that were too unsafe, and sensations that were too strong... that Mike Wheeler had seemed to take a nap.

And the Mike Wheeler that he had *once* been? Before every had happened to take it away? That Mike Wheeler had reemerged. Risky and impulsive and... kind of an idiot.

A Mike Wheeler not overwhelmed by the potential terrors of living.

Maybe that was why he had kissed her...

Because the second his hand was in hers and she pushed them from the plane... he *felt* himself again. Without delay, it had crashed through him. Safety in danger. Control in an uncontrolled state. Full lungs and deep breaths and exhilaration. The pulse of his heart louder than the caution of his brain.

For the first time in years, in her presence, his brain had fallen miraculously, deliciously, *silent*.

But now it had been nine days. Nine days of staring at her number when he should have been staring at his thesis. Nine nights of falling asleep with her on his mind. Nine evenings of feeling the touch of her lips slowly ghost away.

...Lips he never should have tasted at all.

Nine days of letting the fear, once again, take control.

Mike toyed hopelessly with her card, the edges now raw and fraying from days of being encased in his sweating nervous hands. And beside it, lying on his desk, was the other piece of paper.

Not one she had given him, no. But a riddle she had placed for him nonetheless.

Sure, she was a professional. And clearly, she was incredibly skilled at that profession. Because somehow, through a trick he could not piece out, she had flown them *directly upward*.

Mike once again stared at the chicken scratches on the paper, covered in eraser marks from multiple failed attempts to piece it out. His eyes traced the numbers and formulas and lines and angles.

They still led to nothing.

Not even his budding Masters in Physics could help him understand how the hell she had pulled off that stunt.

Yet, as he had never gotten the courage to actually *call* El Hopper, Head Skydiving Instructor, he was never going to know.

"You ready?"

Mike grimaced as Will's voice entered his bedroom.

"Yeah, give me a minute."

Mike slipped his glasses back on, half heartedly ran his fingers

through his messy hair, tossed on his favorite blue hoodie, and gave no thought to the night.

It's not like it mattered what he looked like anyway.

It was just trivia.

"We're gonna be a man short tonight. Dustin can't come. You brush up on your pop culture lately?" Will asked with a smirk as he grabbed his keys from the hook at the door of their shared apartment.

Mike laughed. "Hey, I'm still hip with the kids," he said jokingly. "I had to tell two girls last month to stop blasting Cardi B in the undergrad lab."

Will couldn't help but groan. "Even hearing you say 'Cardi B' makes you sound old. How is that possible?! You're only 25."

"I've been telling you, man! They're still alive!" Lucas emphasized as he downed the rest of his beer. "They all have sequels coming up within the next few years. It's just obvious."

"I get that," Will said simply, "But honestly? That really takes the fun out of it."

Mike absentmindedly watched Will doodle on the trivia pad as they waited for the night to start for their three-man team. Though it was going to hurt them as they played, it was nice to only be three people for once. The small cocktail tables at the bar were tight and constricting, which meant that most weeks the four men were pressed up tight against each other, vying for knee space for an entire two-hour stretch.

It felt good to be able to move.

Mike tried to be a part of their conversation, but the environment was just a bit too loud... as was his brain. In the past 30 minutes since they'd arrived early to snag a table, the large bar had filled up to a point where it was now just a bit too uncomfortable. The voices around them sprung up louder and louder, layering upon one another in an attempt to compete with the music, like some weird

competition where everyone lost. The result was a cacophony of yells that began to box him in with an edgy sense of claustrophobic.

"I'm going to get another beer before the bar gets too crowded," Mike said as he downed the rest of his glass in an attempt to drown out his sensations. "You want anything?"

"I'll have another glass of wine," Will said distractedly.

"Yeah, thanks," Lucas simply raised his glass and nodded.

Mike eased himself up from the table, wound his way through the thickening crowd of intoxicated nerds, and squeezed into a tiny open spot at the edge of the bar. In a rare moment of luck, Mike happened to catch the bartender's eye in an instant. He put in their order and then took a deep breath as the crowd crushed in around him while he waited. His eyes bounced around the back of the bar for something to focus on while the bartender filled his order and set them down.

Instantly, as Mike looked down at the three fresh drinks in front of him, he realized his mistake.

Grimacing as he mentally laid out the winding path back to his table, Mike carefully wrapped his grip around the beer glasses and stuck out a couple of fingers in an attempt to stabilize the wine glass as the tip of a triangle.

He lifted it, satisfied with the stability, took a deep breath, turned around, and...

...instantly had an elbow thrown into his hands.

Mike cried out in surprise as Will's red wine slipped from his fingers, now completely beyond his control. He winced and braced for the impact of the staining cold wetness to hit his feet.

...But it never did.

Mike opened his eyes in surprise to see the glass held firmly in a hand, just a foot from where it had fallen.

"You caught that?!" he exclaimed in surprise, his eyes etched wide on

the wine glass that was still perfectly full.

"Yeah!" a female voice yelled above the din. "And watch where you're going next – "

Her voice cut off instantly. And with it, Mike looked up.

"...time."

Mike's heart lurched into his throat with an intensity that almost made him drop the other two glasses in his hands.

Her hazel eyes, wide and surprised, stared back at him. Her hair was pulled into a messy bun. Small tufts of brown had escaped to frame her face in an act of effortless beauty. Her soft lips were parted in a mirror of his own, half open and attempting to move.

The sea of sounds around them seemed to wash away to silence.

Mike blinked and willed his own lips to speak.

Please for the love of God, speak.

"El! H-hi!" he finally managed.

"H- hi..." she stuttered back hesitantly.

"Ellie, come on! I want to find a seat. There's hardly any... oh!"

Mike's eyes darted, along with El's, to a red headed girl who appeared through the crowd beside them. One Mike instantly recognized as Lucas's skydiving partner.

"I was just... I... um –" El began, but her words cut off in her friend's direction.

"We've got extra space! You can sit with us!"

The girls both looked back at Mike in surprise as Mike's mouth revved up into a flurry completely beyond his control. "Er... I mean, it'll be a tight fit so we couldn't fit any more than just the two of you. Do you have more friends here? We – we can figure it out. It's no

pressure. No pressure at all. It just doesn't look like there's any tables left in here. This place is so crowded, I – "

"Sure. Thanks."

Mike's tongue caught in his throat as El answered. Her voice tinkled softly on top of the cacophony of voices, somehow cutting straight through to his ear.

He couldn't help but feel the corners of his mouth turn up gratefully in reply.

El stood on the sticky floor accepting Mike's invitation as she performed a desperate yet successful attempt to steady her breathing.

She couldn't believe either her luck, or the cruelty of the universe.

At this point? She had no idea which one of them had brought her to this moment.

Yet, either way, there he stood. Directly in front of her. The guy she hadn't been able to stop thinking about for days. All nervous smiles and messy hair and deep twinkling eyes behind dark rimmed glasses (which made him look, though she loathed to admit it, even cuter than the first time she had set eyes on him).

Though a healthy chunk of her rational mind had wanted to write him off completely, in that moment it had no control. She could not hear it as it screamed the facts that she had convinced herself of earlier in the day. ...That he hadn't called. ...That something about his presence had a dangerous effect.

Because in the depths of his eyes she was, once again, instantly ensnared.

"Really? Great!" Mike stuttered, his voice eager in a way that made her heart palpitate. "We're um.. we're just - " he spun around quickly and arched his tall thin frame to peer over the crowd. He pointed behind her. "That way."

El watched with bemusement as Mike fumbled with the beers in his

hands. "Here," he muttered. "I can take back the wine. Sorry about that."

"I'll carry it," she interjected as she pulled it closer to her body. "You clearly didn't do a good job of it the first time."

Mike laughed and ducked his head sheepishly. "Right. True. Okay then, um, well, follow me."

Mike cut to her left and began to lead the way through the crowd to a table in the back. El's feet followed in an instant, almost beyond her control, but before she could even take two steps she felt a sharp elbow in her rib.

"You sure about this, Hopper?" Max's voice played close in a whisper near her ear.

El simply nodded and continued walking, legs feeling both like lead and Jello.

"Alright..." Max said in a playful sing song tone. "But you just say the word and I *will* kick his ass. Right in this bar, for all to see."

"I get it, Max," El groaned.

"Just saying, I've got your back," Max said as the girls rounded on a table with two more familiar faces. "Oh, hello Lucas."

And then, everything stopped.

"Umm..."

El might have been in full-on freak out mode, but nothing inside of her felt as terrified as the guy named Lucas looked as he laid eyes on Max.

"You recovered, I see," Max said with a grand sense of enjoyment. He watched her, eyes wide and mouth agape, as she rounded the table and took the single open bar stool directly next to him.

"I..." he stuttered like a fish out of water. "M-Mike...?"

"Um... I said they could sit with us," Mike said quickly as he placed a beer in front of Lucas. "They were trying to find a table and there weren't any left and we had space and..."

"Hi! I uh... I think you have my wine," a voice interrupted kindly from El's right. His voice was calm, unlike anyone else around her.

"Oh!" she said as she turned to her right. "Is this yours? He – "

"Almost dropped it?" the man asked.

"No," El corrected. "He *did* drop it. I caught it. Here."

"Well, thanks for saving my wine. You're a hero," he joked as he took the long stem, placed it in front of himself and offered his hand. "I'm Will, by the way. I don't know if we really met last week."

El shook his hand. "I'm El."

"Oh, believe me," he said cryptically. "I know."

"Um..."

"So, anyway," Will continued, changing the subject before El could even blink. "Do you two want to join our team? We're short a man tonight."

"We can join your team but we probably won't be much help," Max interjected as she pulled her long red hair out of her ponytail and let it cascade down the back of the chair. Lucas still had not taken his fearful eyes off the girl. "Not me, at least. This isn't my thing. I'm just here because El loves this kind of nerdy stuff."

"I uh... I got you a seat," a voice interjected hurriedly from her left. She looked over to find Mike seated beside a new empty stool tucked in tightly at the too small table.

With a rollicking swoop of her stomach she realized that she'd be pushed tightly in beside him for the entire night.

"Thanks," she said as she worked to smoothly pull herself up into the bar stool, knocking into his knee without any other place for her leg

to go. "I'm sorry if we're cramping your space."

"No problem at all," Mike replied with an earnest smile.

"Okay, they're about to start," Lucas said suddenly, his expression serious yet still holding a heavy nervousness that he seemed to be trying to fight. El had to work to focus her mind onto the man and away from the warm press against her knee. "If you're going to be a part of our team you gotta know the rules."

"Geez Lucas, way to make them feel welcome," Mike replied as he rolled his eyes.

"It's important!" Lucas retorted.

"Alright, tell us your 'rules'," Max said as she rolled her eyes and turned her fingers into air quotes for effect.

"It's just... no blurting out answers," Lucas said seriously. "Keep your voices as quiet as possible because we don't want anyone cheating off of us."

"Why would anyone cheat off of us?" Max asked.

"Because we're the reigning champions and we have been for fifteen consecutive weeks," Lucas replied with annoyance.

"Holy shit, you guys are *nerds*!" Max exclaimed.

"Max!" El called out in surprise.

But it wasn't El that Max had her eye on, it was the stare of death she was receiving from Lucas.

"If you're not going to take this seriously you can find another table," Lucas said shortly.

"Lucas!" Mike cried in frustration as he slapped his hand against the man's shoulder.

"Sorry! I just... We need to take this seriously! Dustin isn't here. We have a huge gap in our knowledge base!"

"Or, you know," Will interjected casually. "You *could* just try sitting back and enjoying yourself for once."

"Nice try," Lucas replied snidely before he took a deep breath and seemed to steady his nerves. "Anyway. Rule number one. Keep your voice low. All the time. We don't want anyone listening to a single word we say. Rule number two. If we can't decide on an answer then it's a majority rule. Unless it's a math question, then Mike makes the decision. A history question, then Will makes the decision. A current events question, I make the decision."

"Happy Monday Night guys!" a female announcer's voice came over a speaker, cutting off Lucas. "Get your drinks ready and put your phones away because Round One is just about to start."

El peeked nervously over to Max and couldn't help but giggle as she saw the girl's eyes glazed over with a heavy level of irritation. Max caught her friends eye and silently mouthed, '*You owe me.*'

'*I know!*' El mouthed in her friend's direction.

Max giggled lightly and lifted her glass in reply.

El bit her lip to contain her secret smile as she lifted hers too. Max, rolling her eyes in a secret communication, clinked the glass with hers, and together, for their own very different reasons, they drank away their discomforts with a big heavy gulp.

"Sorry about Lucas."

The whisper fell tight and close to her ear. It was kind and apologetic, and served to send a shiver straight down her back, past her knee that was pressed against him, and all the way to her toes. She tilted to her left to find Mike swiping his raven hair from his forehead as he leaned in just a bit closer to speak words only meant for her.

"He's just really, um... competitive. Will and I don't really give a shit anymore, but he and Dustin take this very seriously. That and the fact that I forgot that he's terrified of your friend. I think that has him a little riled up."

El giggled. "She has that affect on some of the people she jumps with. I should probably do something about that as the boss, but..."

"Oh, I don't mind," Mike said with a light laugh as he averted his eyes and picked at the coaster under his drink. "Watching him squirm is the most enjoyable part about tonight." His eyes rose up tentatively and caught hers again, and she almost lost herself as he bit his lip. "You know, other than the fact that you're - "

"Mike!"

"What?!" Mike suddenly barked at Lucas, his voice ratcheting from zero to sixty without a blink. The features of his face contorted to a sudden level of malice that almost made El jump.

"You missed the first question," Lucas chided as he wrote down an answer on the paper pad.

Mike shot a mockingly guilty look in El's direction before he leaned in deeper on the table and began to pay attention, his knee pressing harder into hers as he shifted.

She let his knee rest against hers as she dreamed, against her will, about what might have existed the end of his cut off sentence...

Trivia night went along in a way that El had never experienced before. Two hours. Four rounds of questions. And four rounds of drinks to match.

All throughout, El and Max tossed glances at each other, each growing funnier as they got more and more buzzed. All the while, the boys that surrounded them dug deep into the trivia topics as they were announced. As usual, many of the questions were new to El. Simple facts about the world that they lived in were always so scattered in her mind that she was of only intermittent help. It was only when they were hit with a round that was heavy in math that El could have chimed in. Numbers and formulas were intensely natural for her, but it was clear that Mike was so well versed in that area that no help was needed at all. Though, she *had* caught one of his errors in the second to last question. (A fact that had seemed to impress him to no end, thank you very much).

It wasn't until the last round that things got interesting.

El was at the end of her fourth beer. She was fully afloat, riding on a cloud from both one too many drinks and the seemingly consistent smile on Mike's face. Any hesitation he'd had toward her had seemed to vanish as the beer had kept flowing, and with it her heart had calmed down to hold out a simple hope that maybe, just maybe, the last nine days had been nothing more than a big misunderstanding.

Maybe?

The host announced the totals going into the final round.

"...And vying for first, we now have a tie, folks!" the host said with nerdy dramatism. "With 77 points each, we have The Road Boys and The Mind Flayers. Now, the final round counts for double points, and each question requires three pieces of information. Okay teams, get ready for 'classic film and television ships'.

El watched the eyebrows on all of the boys draw tight against their foreheads.

"What does that mean?" Will asked. "Like, the name of the boat from Gilligan's Island or something?"

"I don't know anything about fictional ships," Mike groaned.

"Now, I'm not talking about large boats floating on the ocean," the girl over the speaker continued. "I'm talking about classic tv and film couples. In order to get the answer, I need the name of both of the characters in the relationship, and the film or show they are from."

"Shit! We're screwed!" Lucas cursed hard into his beer as he tossed down his pencil.

Without hesitation, Max snorted in amusement and laid her hand on Lucas's arm. "Give El the pad of paper."

"What?" Lucas asked, guarding the pen.

"Trust me," Max said, serious as a heart attack. "If you want to win tonight, give El the pad of paper. *Now.*"

El's buzzy heartbeat ramped up. She drained the rest of her beer to try to stave it off.

"Yeah," she said with a hint of drunken nervousness as she rolled her eyes at herself. "I'll ace this. Hand me the paper."

Lucas, realizing he had no choice but to entrust a fifteen week winning streak to a random girl he had only met once, hesitantly handed the paper across the table without a word. El took the pencil and twirled it within her fingers as the announcer began the final round.

"Number one. This classic TV couple from the 90s could never decide what it meant that they were 'on a break'."

El snorted cockily as, without a beat, she scribbled *Ross and Rachel – Friends* on the pad and showed it around. Mike and Lucas vaguely shrugged, and Will gave a knowing nod as he took a look.

"Ugh, what a dick," Max replied as she read the answer. "He was so overrated."

"Agreed," El said easily as she placed the pad down and got ready for the next question.

"Number two: This classic 90s film couple's life together was drastically cut short because they didn't realize there would be enough room for both of them to float on a door."

"Ha!" El giggled loudly, catching herself with her hand.

"What does that question even mean?" Lucas asked as El wrote *Jack and Rose – Titanic* on the paper.

Max leaned over to him to explain quietly in his ear as El looked around at the table and held up her answer. She couldn't help but feel a silly sense of confidence. Neither Mike nor Will had seemed to know the answer, and Lucas was deep into listening to Max as she whispered the context of the answer in his ear.

It was odd, but after so many drinks, Lucas didn't seem to be so uncomfortable around Max anymore...

"Question three," the announcer said after a moment, bringing her mind back to the point. El's heartbeat ramped up as she prepared herself for something more challenging.

"This can be summed up in three words: As you wish."

"Too easy," El said to herself as she instinctively scratched *Buttercup and Westley – The Princess Bride*, onto the paper.

She lifted the paper and showed it to the group once again, and was met with shrugs from most, yet an emphatic thumbs up from Mike.

"You know The Princess Bride?" El whispered in surprise.

"It's my little sister's favorite movie," Mike replied with a shrug, his eyes swimming in an intoxicated smile before he bashfully admitted, "...and probably one of mine."

El had to bite her lip to stop herself from swooning right off of her chair, but she was brought back to reality as the announcer cut back over the speaker.

"Question four: In this 1940s classic, of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she had to walk into his."

El screwed up her face for a moment and took a deep breath as she let the thought materialize. She wrote a little more slowly this time, but she was 99% certain that the names were *Rick and Ilsa – Casablanca*.

She looked up to show the pad to her team.

"I have absolutely no idea. That looks good to me," Will said, and Lucas and Mike shrugged silently in reply.

"Okay, and the final question!" the girl called.

El felt sweat bead down her back as she faced the potential of her possibly her first ever perfect trivia round...

"Here we go. 30 million viewers tuned in in 1981 to watch this TV supercouple's fictional wedding."

"Why would anybody do that?!" Lucas cried in surprise as he listened to the question. "God, the 80s were weird."

"Ellie..." Max called over with mock nervousness, "that one *has* to be too obscure, even for you."

"Nah," El said as she waved off the worry. She was suddenly very happy that she had spent way too many hours watching classic soap opera clips on YouTube, as she wrote *Luke and Laura – General Hospital* on the pad with great ease.

"I don't even need to show you guys that one," El said confidently. "Just know that I'm right."

"All set?" Will asked eagerly. El nodded and handed him the paper. Just as he had with every other round, Will jumped out of his seat and made his way up to hand the answers in to the host.

"You feel good about that?" Mike asked her quietly, leaning in close as he conspiratorially eyed the other teams in the room.

El cocked her head drunkenly toward him and nodded. "They're all correct. Trust me, I know this stuff."

"Oh, believe me," he replied as he looked back, his eyes jarringly close as they connected with hers, his voice low. "I trust you."

The look in his eye didn't seem to have anything to do with the game.

El felt her face heat up in the darkness as she looked at him full on, their knees still touching beneath the small table, just as they had been for hours.

It was there again.

It resided in the depths of his eyes.

They possessed their own gravity. Deep and dark with an unknown end. Pulling her, at her complete surrender, into some orbit that she hadn't been a part of before.

El found herself closer...

"Alright everyone! Time for the final scores!"

El jumped, suddenly snapping out of her intoxicated trance as she looked back at their table mates and caught Max's very amused eye. Lucas was visibly nervous, toying with his empty glass. Will had returned to drawing on a napkin, clearly unaffected by the results of the evening. And when she looked back, Mike was still staring at her. A soft dazed smile playing on his lips.

"...In second place, with 85 points, The Road Boys. And in first place, with 87 points, after a perfect round, is The Mind Flayers!"

"YES!"

The table erupted with an excitement that El had been completely unprepared for. High fives bounced all around. Almost empty drinks were clacked together in a cheers. And before she knew it, she was fully wrapped up in a pair of arms.

"Sorry," Mike said suddenly, his voice thick and nervous. He backed away and let her go with soft eyes with a timid smile. "I got excited."

The bar was close to empty, and suddenly, so was the table, but for the girl that he had not been able to stop thinking about since the moment he had met her.

Despite the fact that the other three had left to go to the bathroom one last time, he couldn't help but notice that El hadn't scooted away from him. Her knee was still pressed firmly into the base of his thigh. A lazy smile played upon her lips as she toyed with the winner's drink token between her fingers. The bright golden flecks in her eyes stood out beneath the incandescent lights that hung above them. It shined against her hair, too, highlighting the golden hues that wrapped through her messy bun like soft stripes. Maybe it was the alcohol, and maybe it was just the light, but it seemed like she shimmered as she sat next to him.

Once again, just like the first time he saw her, she seemed a little bit brighter than anyone else in the room.

Mike felt sweat bead at the back of his neck. He was deeply grateful for the amount of alcohol that was in his body to stave off the nervousness he knew he'd naturally be feeling in this moment.

"That was fun," she said quietly, her voice a little bit slurred, bringing him out of his reverie as she continued to look down at her drink token. "I've never *won* trivia before."

"Well, you earned it," he said honestly. "We wouldn't have won if it weren't for your category."

El smiled fully and rolled her eyes, still looking down at her hands. "It's kind of embarrassing to get a perfect score all by myself on 'classic relationships of television and film,' but I'm glad if it helped the cause."

"Nah, don't be embarrassed," Mike said reassuringly. "Everyone has their topic. And that was uh... that was really cute."

El smiled wider, and finally her eyes traced up to meet his.

"Okay guys, I'm out of here," Will interrupted as he came back to the table and took his coat from the back of his chair. "And let me give you some advice. There's no point in either of you waiting, either."

"What does that mean?" Mike asked quizzically.

"Umm..." Will hummed dramatically as he looked over his shoulder and then leaned closer into the table. "Lucas and Max are hardcore making out in the hallway to the bathrooms."

"What!?" Mike and El's matching voices filled the emptying bar with matched shock.

"I mean, you can go see for yourself if you want," Will offered with a shrug. "But neither of them look like they're coming up for air any time soon."

"Yeah, I think I'm good without seeing that," Mike said with a laugh. "That's crazy."

"Yeah, anyway. I'm exhausted and I have to teach second graders

how to make clay pots in the morning. El, do you need a ride or anything?"

"Thanks, but I live just a few blocks away." El replied kindly.

"Okay, cool. Mike? You walking or - ?"

There were reasons why Will was Mike's best friend. One of them was the effortlessly discreet way he had in helping Mike keep his dignity.

Mike silently thanked him with a wide eyed nod, and his stomach tied in a quick knot as he weighed out the potential two mile walk that he faced back to their shared apartment.

Yet...

"Yeah, I'll walk," Mike said. "Have a good night."

"You, too." Will replied with a knowing smile as he zipped up his light jacket. "It was nice to hang out with you, El. Thanks for winning trivia for us!"

"I'd say it was a team effort," El replied kindly as she waved her token in the air. "But you're welcome."

With a final wave, Will made his way through the bar and out the door.

"Do you need to wait for Max?" Mike asked.

El snickered and shook her head. "No, not at all. Once she's moved onto this portion of the evening, it's fair game if I leave."

"Does this... happen a lot?" Mike asked in confusion as he eyed the hallway at the back of the bar.

"Oh! No," she waved her hand dismissively and giggled as tried to correct herself. "That's not what I meant. It's just that we're not 'tied at the hip' type of friends. She's clearly decided what she wants to do with her night, and that's enough for me to leave when I want."

"Oh, cool," Mike said, suddenly self conscious.

"Yeah," El replied, her eyes on his once again.

Keep it cool, Wheeler.

"Um... can I walk you home, then?"

It was hard to tell in the darkened lights, but he could swear that he saw her cheeks blush. She nodded almost shyly, her hair falling slightly into her face as she did so.

"That'd be nice, thanks."

Mike followed El as she stood up and began to walk through the bar toward the door. The second Mike got to his feet he realized how surprisingly drunk he was. He stumbled the slightest bit against the last table by the door, but played it off before she seemed to notice.

The spring chill was apparent in the air as they stepped outside, and Mike instantly slipped his hands into his pockets. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was to stave off his urge to lead her by the small of the back.

He'd be damned if touching her without asking was going to be a mistake he made again.

"I'm this way," El said as she put up the hood of her sweater and nodded to the left. Mike followed willingly.

"Crazy we live so close to each other and I've never seen you in this neighborhood before," he said as they made their way down a line of shops and bars.

"Where do you live, exactly?" she asked, her eyes tracing up to his.

"Well, close enough, I guess," he said, suddenly self conscious for reasons he couldn't quiet place. "I live about a mile or so down the road, more or less. But I don't have a car so I walk through this neighborhood all the time to get to the University."

"You don't have a car?" El asked loudly. "How do you pull that off in Indianapolis?"

The question hit at the heart of Mike's nervousness.

"Um... long story..." He started. But instantly, he stopped. "It's not too bad, though," he interjected, interrupting himself as quickly as possible. "This is a pretty good city to walk. And I bike a lot, too."

Luckily for his anxiety, El seemed to let it slide with nothing more than a shrug as they passed a darkened diner.

"Ugh... I wish Benny's was open 24 hours," El whined suddenly, her voice an intoxicated slur that was unbearably cute. "I could *really* go for a waffle right now."

"Waffles, huh?" Mike asked with amusement.

Her eyes suddenly bored into Mike's with a seriousness that almost caught him off guard. "The longest and most satisfying relationship of my life has been with waffles. Lots of people are never there for you when you need them. But a waffle? Always there. Every time. Except for right now, but that's not the waffle's fault. That's Benny's fault."

"Damn you, Benny," Mike joked with a shaking fist.

"Aww, don't talk about Benny like that," El protested in a light slur. "He's the best."

"Oh! Is Benny a real person?" Mike asked in surprise. "Sorry."

"Yeah," El nodded. "he owns the place. He's been keeping me in my addiction since I moved to this spot a few years back. He's uh... he's got the best food for when I'm sad."

Mike took a double take at her unexpected words.

El grimaced, seemingly only realizing her words after she spoke them.

"Sorry..." she said with a slowly and quiet tone, so very different than anything she had said the entire night. And then quickly, she turned them around a corner and off the main road.

The emptiness and quiet of the new path seemed to fill the silence

with something heavy that he could not place. And, step by step, as El remained silent, Mike began to get more nervous.

It quickly became clear quickly, however, that those nerves were for good reason.

"Mike?" she finally said, her voice shaky.

"Yeah?"

El didn't look up, yet her feet had seemed to slow. She was quiet for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice was incredibly soft.

"Why you didn't call me?"

Mike winced as his chest cracked in half.

They walked in silence for a moment, and each of his foot falls felt more like trash than the last.

"I wanted to call you," he finally said, finding his voice. "Like, I *really* wanted to call you."

"Okay..." she said slowly, still looking pointedly at her feet.

"I *tried* calling you. Like... every day." Mike heard himself admit. "I was just..." he sighed and pushed his hands deeper into his pockets. "I was embarrassed I guess? And uh... scared. I... I didn't think you'd actually want to see me again."

At that, El looked up in surprise. "Why would you think that?" she asked with confusion, her eyes glassy in the moonlight. "I gave you my number, didn't I?"

"That's true," Mike said carefully as her words struck him, his heart beating too fast for his ribs to handle. "It's just... God, I acted like such an idiot that day. I guess I figured you gave me your number out of pity."

At that, El laughed lightly, and Mike grimaced as he waited to find out if her reaction was good or bad.

There was a hint of derision in her eyes as she looked back up at him. "I don't give my phone number to people out of pity, Mike," She said simply.

"Oh..." Mike replied lamely.

El looked back down at her feet and fell silent for a another moment before she hesitantly said, "Honestly... I don't really give my phone number to *anybody*."

"Really?" Mike asked suddenly.

"Yeah," she replied, stopping in her tracks and finally looking up long enough to hold his gaze.

A vulnerability played in her eyes. It spoke things deeper than she seemed willing to admit with words. And instantly, Mike regretted his mistake more than he had at any other time in the last week and a half.

Somehow, through his fear, he had hurt the most beautiful girl he had ever met.

"This is me," El pointed behind her.

Mike followed El to the door of a duplex, but stopped at the base of a landing as she took a step up. Two well lit sconces framed the tiny entryway in orange light. The light from them dropped softly against her skin as she turned around to face him. The six-inch loft of the landing almost brought her up to his height.

"So," she said, looking him directly in the eye. "If I give someone my number I actually *want* them to call me."

She said it strongly, with a clarity that made Mike's chest burn with deep and nameless understanding.

"I'm sorry," Mike said, meaning it completely. "I *promise* I'll call you this time."

"You promise?" she repeated in surprise, her face softening in a lovely way as her eyebrow cocked with intrigue. "Promises are very serious

things."

"Yeah, I know," he replied sincerely. "I take my promises very seriously."

"Well," she said softly, so softly he had to take a step closer to hear her. A smile slowly etched onto her lips and her eyes lit up magnificently as she said, "Then I promise I'll reply."

And at that, so many things happened at once.

El took a light breath.

And then, her eyes slipped shut.

Mike froze as she slowly began to lean in toward him.

His eyelashes closed around his sight in an instinctual reply.

He shivered as he felt her breath exhale so very close to his lips.

And in an instant, as though his brain had exploded from the sensations, lights blared behind his eyelids.

The instant buzz of intensity was audible. It grew brighter and brighter, louder and louder, until it was almost unbearable.

It was delirious. Confusing. It was –

...not behind his eyes...

Mike's eyes shot back open.

Past the gorgeous vision of El's close-eyed serenity less than an inch from matching his lips, the sconces that framed them beamed at a shockingly bright glow. Insanely brighter than they had been just seconds prior.

...Insanely brighter than he knew was safe.

On protective instinct, Mike pulled El into his arms and tugged her hard, backward, off of the step. He braced her body from falling against his chest as she gasped in surprise.

A loud **POP** echoed through his ears, and with it the lights snuffed out into instant darkness.

Mike buried his face in El's hair and covered her head as the glass shattered down onto the exact location where El had been standing just seconds prior.

"What the fuck!" Mike cried breathlessly.

"Sorry..." El moaned drunkenly as she buried her face into his chest.

Mike chuckled, completely disarmed by her response. "What?"

But he didn't get an answer, because suddenly, El's body stiffened in his arms. She shot back from his embrace in an instant.

"Nothing." She said with a strange and immediate curtness.

Mike watched in confusion as El clawed her hair from her eyes and whipped back to look at the decimation in the darkened entryway. When she looked back at Mike again, her expression looked terrified. Her eyes swam with instant and alarming panic.

"Are you hurt?" Mike asked in confusion.

"I...I..." El stuttered. Her breath was now coming in heaves. Her eyes shifted nervously. A trickle of something dark began to shimmer from her nose.

Mike gasped in surprise.

"El... your... your nose is bleeding..."

And then, El yelped.

"I have to go," she said suddenly.

Mike reached out to her, "Are you sure you're okay. You –"

But El pulled out of his reach. "I'm fine. I'm sorry. It's um... it's late."

"Okay...?" Mike replied tentatively as he took an instinctual step back from her.

"This just happens sometimes. The uh... the nosebleeds! The nosebleeds, I mean." She said quickly. "I'll be fine."

"Okay, well, I uh..." It felt so stupid saying it after the whiplashed events of the last 30 seconds, but, "I'll call you?"

"Yeah, sounds good," El said distractedly as she cupped her palm over her nose and retreated quickly up the steps. Glass crunched beneath her boots, but it did not seem to slow her down at all. "Thanks for walking me home," she said quickly, her voice high and tight, as she fished out her keys and unlocked the door.

She slipped through the door. Almost as an afterthought, she stuck her head out and offered a rushed, "Goodnight, Mike."

"Goodnight - "

Yet before he could finish, El Hopper had disappeared behind the door and Mike was left alone, feet stock still on the walkway, staring with complete confusion at a darkened pile of shattered glass as it glittered coldly in the moonlight.

Fun fact: My mother named me after one of those classic ships in tv and movie history. I was destined to be a sappy fic writer, I swear.

Thanks so much for reading! Until next time...

- L -

3. Chapter 3

Hello readers! Thanks for bearing with me. I've been slow going on his fic with a lot of life buzzing around but I'm definitely not abandoning it so never fear. Enjoy chapter 3!

"So, you're sick, huh?"

"Yes?"

"Right..."

El shifted uncomfortably on the couch as she listened to her father's footsteps shuffle behind her. The zipper of his jacket played in the air before he huffed it off and hung it on its hook. She heard his footsteps head through the kitchen. His heavy sigh mixed with the sound of the refrigerator door opening, and El worked to steady her breath as the door shut and his fingernail cracked the seal of a fresh beer. Before she knew it, his footsteps once again entered her vision.

Jim Hopper sat heavily in the threadbare armchair across from her normal spot on the couch. A long day was indicative in his movements. He leaned forward, took a drink, and caught her eyes with a sense of dry amusement.

Her palms began to sweat as she looked up.

"You know," he started, nodding along with narrowed eyes, "I guess it does totally normal for sick people to drive over an hour just to sit on their Dad's couch and wait for hours for him to come home just so he can make them chicken soup."

"Yours is better than anyone else's?" El replied weakly.

"It's from a can, kid," Hopper replied dryly, a smirk quirked beneath his moustache. "Listen, it's not like I'm not happy to see you. Of course I am. But you don't come home unannounced unless something's going on. So, spare me the anxiety. What is it?"

El stared blankly at the man who had been her only true support for

over a decade. The man who was single handedly responsible for her kept freedom from a life that she tried with everything in her power to forget. Her blood bubbled with long unfelt shame.

Why? Oh, maybe because less than 24 hours prior she had exploded an entire set of outdoor lights simply because the tingling anticipation in her body was too much for her to handle. Simply because's Mike's breath near her lips had felt more real than any kiss she had ever had. Or maybe she was here because the week she had she had treated her secrets like a parlour tricks for the very first time in her life and shot that very same stranger with the intoxicating presence straight up into the air. Maybe, just maybe, that was one of the reasons why she was here on a Tuesday night, trying to drown in the cushions of the well worn couch in her dad's house in the woods.

Hopper seemed to see the gears moving behind her eyes, "You might as well just spit it out, kid. You already came all the way here."

A little part of her heart died as her lips accepted their fate and unsealed.

"I uh..." she spoke slowly, "I had an accident last night."

"An accident..." he repeated, leaning forward with interest, "What kind of accident?"

"Um..." she stuttered, her cheeks turning red against her will, "I lost control. The lights at my front door exploded."

Jim Hopper's brow furrowed in surprise. He was silent for a moment as he tried to process the information. "Did you get scared or something?"

"Not exactly..." she said quietly as her eyes darted away with her words.

"Did anyone else see it?" he said, his voice low and beginning to fill with the heaviness she desperately wanted to avoid.

El cringed, "Yes."

Hopper leaned back slowly, "Who?"

"A guy," she breathed, almost on a whisper.

"A guy?" he asked, amusement once again present in his voice, "What guy?"

'What guy', indeed.

It all cracked within her at that moment. Her feeble restraints against her emotions, which had served to keep her upright the entire day, fell upon his words. In its place she felt the drivers that had brought her here. The fear. The confusion. The outright shock of something that had never occurred once before in her life.

Her cheeks, now flaming hot, were not flaming for the reasons that she wanted anymore. They were no longer flaming from the softness of his voice as he promised to call, or the true apology he'd held in his eyes in that soft moment. A moment she had felt so lucky to have. A moment she would have chosen to live in forever. Her heart was no longer alight from the reflection of the orange lights in his eyes, a reflection so clear that she could see her own self within his depths, pulling her in with a warmth that she was wholly unprepared for. She was no longer aflutter from the movement of his lips. The soft 'oh' they shaped as she gave into the buzzing sensation in her chest and let her eyelids slide shut. She was no longer weak from the feeling of his breath, slow and hesitant, against her lips as she paused ever so slightly, ready for his touch.

...so ready for his touch that she had lost all control.

"Look," El said slowly as she swallowed it back down in harsh gulp, "I wouldn't come to you for help with men, usually. But... I can't talk to anyone else. I need your advice."

"Okay..." Hopper replied, confusion now mixing into his tone, "El, you know my opinion on this. You're a grown woman. All I ask is that you're safe and you keep your secrets quiet. But... it sounds like you didn't keep your secrets quiet, huh?"

"No..." El moaned miserably.

Hopper was quiet for a long moment.

"How long have you known him?" he finally asked. His voice was soft, subtle, and carrying none of the frustration she'd been prepared for. It was something for which she was wholly grateful.

El let out a sigh as she began the interrogation, "I've met him twice."

"And this is the only thing that's happened?" he asked, "You burned out some lights?"

El averted her eyes once again, shame thickening in her chest, "Um..."

"El..." he pressed, full worry entering his voice in an instant.

"Okay, fine!" she burst suddenly, "He came in for a tandem jump a couple weeks back and it was his birthday and when I was jumping with him I *might* have been a complete idiot and done a tiny bit of anti gravity stuff."

"EL!" Hopper boomed with a sudden ferociousness that made her suddenly feel fourteen years old.

"I know!" she agreed with a matching yell as she helplessly threw her hands in the air, "Believe me, I know. I don't know what I was thinking! But now I think I... Dad, I don't think I *was* thinking. I don't I don't know if I can control myself around him. This stuff is just...happening. This has never happened before."

"This is a problem, kid."

"You think I don't know that?" she retorted darkly, "Do you think I would just drive all the way home to talk to you about boys!? I know it's a problem. I don't know what to do!"

Her dad sighed and took a breath, but his eyes did not shift from hers.

"Okay, okay, El. Calm down. It's going to be fine," her father said, his voice softening as he leaned forward closer to her. "You *do* know what to do."

"I – "

"Listen," he said in a voice that was plainly factual, "This doesn't sound like one of those isolated incidents. Even those were bad. You can't do stuff like this. It's not safe. Your old hero antics weren't safe for us, for you, and this isn't safe either."

El scoffed in an instant, "- Why do you bring that up every time we talk about it? It's been years, Dad."

Hopper snorted, "You pulled this shit in the front yard, kid. You never know what happened to that person. One slip of the tongue to the wrong person and our cover could have been blown entirely. And the *plane*? Don't get me started about the plane - "

"- My friends were on that plane, Dad. And I haven't done anything like that in years. I got the message, believe me," she said darkly. "This isn't that."

"I know," he said slowly. He pinched the bridge of his nose in a way that was so familiar it made El's stomach drop. "But we have rules, El. It's not very many rules. Just a few. And they're not there because I like them. They're there because they're necessary. They keep you and me safe."

"I *know*. That's why I'm here," she said sternly. "I don't know what to do."

"Yes you do," he said, almost to himself, "This guy, did he catch on at all?"

"Did he catch on that I'm manipulating gravity and electricity..." she deadpanned, her eyes narrow. "No. I don't think so."

"Not at all?" He pressed, "No questions or anything?"

"I mean..." El squirmed, the memory of his frenzied post accidental kiss ramble flitting through her mind, "He was pretty blown away by the thing during the tandem jump - "

Hopper groaned.

"- But he didn't know it was me!" she defended strongly, "I promise. He's never going to jump again anyway so he'll never figure that out."

I told him it was a trick of the air."

"A trick of the air," Hopper said with rolled eyes and a snort. "What about last night? The lights."

"I was..." the nervousness El had felt as he'd first walked in the door returned as the root of her fear reemerged. "He walked me home. I'd had too much to drink. I was.... I was about to kiss him goodnight so my eyes were closed. I didn't know what was happening, but I think he saw it. They got really bright. He pulled me from the porch because the lights got so bright. Then they exploded."

"Okay," he repeated carefully.

"The lights..." El said with a cringe, "And the glass covers."

"Wow," Hopper said with a whistle. "You really did a number on that one."

"Yeah... and then... ugh," she groaned, "He noticed the nosebleed before I was able to get out of there."

"Okay..." he said darkly as he scratched his beard with compulsive nervousness, "What do you know about this guy?"

El shrugged, the question suddenly weighing on her mind.

What did she know about him?

He was tall. 25 years old, just last week. He emitted a unique combination of being both fearful *and* reckless; intense *and* vulnerable; so serious and yet so wonderfully goofy at the same time. He had precious black hair that looked so wonderful tousled by the wind, and his eyes were so deep they made her feel like she could swim in them from the very first second they landed on hers. His hand felt like a perfect fit in an instant way she had never felt and –

"His name's Mike."

"Mike what?" Hopper asked, the voice of a cop conducting a report seemed to override his emotions.

"Um..."

"El Hopper," he scolded, "you kiss a guy before you even know his last name?"

El scoffed and rolled her eyes, "Don't tell me you never kissed a woman without knowing her last name, hypocrite."

"Okay, okay, we're not talking about me," Hopper said, backtracking as quickly as possible, "What do you know about him? Anything I can use to do a background check?"

"You want to do a background check?!" El yelled in surprise.

"Of course I do," he said simply, "This is serious, El. We need to know who we're dealing with and you're not giving me much to go on. Do you know his job?"

"No..."

"Address?"

"No..."

"License plate or phone number?"

"No, and he doesn't drive."

"So let me get this straight," Hopper said with a chortle, "This guy named Mike, who you know absolutely nothing about, makes you lose control of yourself to the point that you exploded something for the first time in a decade."

"Yes?" she squeaked.

"You know the answer here, kid."

"I – "

"You know it's the right answer."

"But – "

"You came home because you needed someone else to tell you what you didn't want to hear. So I'm saying it. You've gotta cut this guy off."

El bit her lip. The acid in her stomach bubbled to the point where she felt sick.

"Listen," he said, a bit softer this time. "You know I keep an eye on everything. I think we're still safe, for right now at least. But you can't risk it. You can't risk spending time with someone who puts you in jeopardy."

"I know," she said weakly, the words so much heavier now that they were said by someone other than the terrified voice in the back of her head.

Her hand, beneath the blanket, gripped tightly onto her phone where, just a few hours prior, his number had finally appeared.

And with it had come a message she'd read so many times she'd memorized it:

Hi, it's Mike. It was so great to see you last night. Thanks for being our MVP! I was worried after last night, are you feeling better?

Followed by, in the next hours, not one, but two, calls.

Just like he'd promised.

El's chest tightened hard as she looked into her dad's eyes and accepted the words she knew she'd needed to hear from him.

The writing was on the wall.

Mike had kept his promise.

But she was going to have break her promise to him.

He simply couldn't explain it.

Residential electricity did *not* act like that.

Okay, maybe there *was* a world in which electrical current could surge enough so the lightbulbs themselves could be overtaxed in that way. Yet, the amount of current necessary would be disastrous.

And for the surge to be so strong that it shattered the *glass of the encasements*?

There was no way.

Mike groaned as he came to the same dead end yet again. He pushed back a fully scribbled piece of paper and folded it over to reveal a fresh piece on his tablet, below.

This was supposed to be Mike's forte. Staring at the seeming mysteries of the world and piecing them out. It had never been an interest to 'fix' anything, but to simply understand it. A constant search to explain everything he could to himself.

Maybe his therapist was right. Maybe the obsession had always been an effort to control.

But that was a fool's errand. He knew that. The deeper he'd gotten into his studies, the more that was clear.

Yet, everyday things that happened here on Earth? Those were almost always easy to understand.

This, though? This was not easy to understand at all.

And it was driving him crazy.

Not as crazy as the girl he'd been standing with while it had occurred, but close.

And this? This half filled tablet chock full of desperate attempts to crack the mystery? This was serving as a wonderful distraction from her.

From everything about her.

From the soft smile that had played lazily on her lips as she'd twirled her winner's token between her fingers, a smile he felt, in that

moment, was the most beautiful one he'd ever seen. From the way her eyes had twinkled in the lights right before they had exploded, amber hues swimming with something that had seemed, he'd hoped, deeper than intoxication. From the crushing disappointment of an almost sealed kiss. From the abject fear that had arisen into her eyes as her nose bled suddenly in the moonlight, a fear that had seemed to come to her from nowhere, but one he understood, deep in his chest, in a way he could not explain.

From two full days of unanswered texts and calls that were plaguing him and making him lose his mind no matter how hard he tried to keep it together.

Was she okay, at least? Had she been hit by glass? Had she *known* what had happened? Or had she been more drunk than he'd thought? So drunk that when she sobered up she realized she never wanted to see him again?

Mike tried to shake the worry that compounded upon the rest of it, but something about the specific brand of fear he'd seen in her eyes had branded itself onto his mind. Mike scoffed at himself.

This girl literally jumps out of a plane every day. She can't be afraid of anything. You were drunk.

Yet, for reasons he couldn't comprehend, he couldn't believe the logic.

He'd recognized something in her reaction like he watching a mirror of his own self. It was a sign that something was truly wrong. And while he didn't know what it was, where it stemmed from, or how to fix it... he desperately wanted to.

Should he try to reach out again?

No, Wheeler, a text and two missed calls seemed to be more than enough. Don't get desperate and stalkerish.

Should he stop by her house? Just to make sure she was okay?

*Okay. Yeah, no. If calling again seems stalkerish, that is **definitely** too stalkerish.*

"Did you leave some coffee for me?"

Mike jumped as a familiar voice echoed behind him from the hallway.

"Maybe half a cup, sorry," Mike grumbled as he dropped his pencil upon the pad and brought his palms to his eyes to apply some much relieving pressure.

"Rude," Dustin scoffed as he made his way across the kitchen and wrestled out a breakfast bar from his highly disorganized shelf. "You know, Wheeler, you're forgetting our deal. You make me coffee and I'm your chauffeur."

"I just poured myself this one, you can have it," Mike offered, "I've had too much anyway."

"Now, that's more like it!" Dustin exclaimed happily. He dropped into the chair opposite of Mike and and the full coffee cup toward himself before he finally made his opinion known, "You look like shit, man. The girl still not call back?"

Mike groaned and dropped his head back into his hands, "I swear I shouldn't tell you anything."

"I'm telling you! Just sign up for her class. Best way to get back around her," Dustin offered as he peeled the wrapper back on his bar.

Mike raised his eyes darkly toward Dustin, "You want me to commit to jumping out of a plane ten more times just to be around a girl."

"Anything for love, man," Dustin shrugged casually, "You ready to go?"

"Yeah," Mike sighed, "Just let me grab my bag."

Mike haphazardly swiped the tablet covered in his failed electrical puzzle off of the table and hurried to his room. He passed the mirror as he entered his door and grimaced at the reflection. He *did* look terrible. Dark circles had appeared beneath his eyes from two nights of mismanaged sleep. His hair was shooting every which way, looking uncomfortably like that of a mad scientist working on a

conspiracy theory. Which he was increasingly starting to worry... he was.

Mike shook his head hard and ran his fingers through it in a vain attempt to calm it down. Then quickly, giving up on himself in the interest of time, he straightened his glasses and swept his tablet, now filled with two confusing mysteries in two weeks, off of his desk and into his bag. Pulling his fingers away, he felt a familiar piece of cardstock slip between his fingers.

He stopped instantly, the distractions of the day fading easily at the sight of her name.

"If I give my number to someone I actually want them to call me."

Mike took a deep breath, and for just a moment, let the disappointment wash over him.

That night had been almost perfect.

There'd been a question in his mind since he'd met her. It had plagued him all throughout the week as he'd tried and failed and tried and failed to get himself to use her number. Had it simply been the insanity of the moment? The adrenalin? The long known sweeping fear followed by a searing jolt of sweeping joy that he hadn't felt in so very long?

Had his gut feeling for her simply been from the fact he'd fallen 13,000 feet with her through the sky?

Well, on Monday night he'd gotten his answer.

No. Not that all.

It wasn't the jump.

It was her.

Despite the abject nervousness that had raced through his body when his eyes had landed on her in the bar, he'd found it shockingly easy to be beside her that entire night. It was almost like his senses had been heightened by her presence. He couldn't explain it, but something

about her seemed to light up the very molecules in the air that surrounded her. He'd been captivated by the uniquely careful way she'd seemed to think through everything she said. Her light laugh had seemed to tingle along his skin. He'd spent more time than he'd like to admit watching her from the corner of his eyes, mapping the way her forehead creased when she was deep in concentration, possessing an intensity to her expression that almost seemed like she was trying to move things on the table with her mind.

There was something so different about her.

She was intriguing to a point that he could not explain.

"If I give my number to someone I actually want them to call me."

"MIKE! Come on!"

Mike jumped, pulled back to reality through Dustin's bark. Likely running late for class now, he grabbed his day bag and rushed out of his bedroom door. Wordlessly, just as they did every Thursday morning at 9:30am, Mike followed Dustin to his car parked in front of their rental house, his mind attempting to focus on the class he had to lead ahead.

The drive went along quietly, Mike only flinching at two fast brakes, as he laid out his plan for class. It wasn't like he needed much of one, to be honest, given that it was the last class of the semester. An easy morning was ahead. All he had to look forward to was handing out the tests and blue books, sitting back, and then agonizing over unanswered calls and texts for the next two hours while eighty undergrads explained the basic concepts of Physics back to him to the best of their ability.

"You know, you could just text her again," Dustin said, invading his thoughts, "You two did survive flying projectile glass together, that's gotta be a bonding experience if I've ever heard of one."

Mike rolled his eyes, "If nothing else to let her know she really needs an electrician to take a look at her house."

"Are you sure this one really happened? It sounds insane," Dustin said

as he pulled off the main road toward campus, "How drunk were you guys? Maybe you imagined it like you imagined that the girl could fly on your birthday?"

"I didn't say she could fly!" Mike exclaimed for the twentieth time in two weeks, "I just said I didn't know how she did what she did."

"Listen! Maybe she can fly! Who knows!"

"Right," Mike deadpanned.

"All I'm saying is there's only one way you're going to find out anything. And that's to not give up so easily. She told you twice she wants to see you again, the least you can do is try to text or call one more time. Or, you could sign up for her class."

"I'm not signing up for her class," Mike said dismissively, "But I'll think about texting her," Mike said, his heart deeply wanting to take Dustin's advice, but his head knowing better than to ever listen to a word the man said. "Thanks for the ride."

"Anytime, sweetie!" Dustin sang, "Don't forget your backpack and your packed lunch!"

"Thanks, mom," Mike grimaced with a well worn eye roll as he crawled out of the car.

Mike watched Dustin drive off as he played with his phone in his pocket and attempted the impossible yet again.

To figure out if there was anything at all he could say to get her to reply.

El's eyes glazed with boredom toward the empty TV screen. All the while, a corner of her mind opened the freezer door, jostled a half empty carton of Ben and Jerry's Americone Dream ice cream free from the cluttered contents, and loosened a spoon from the half open drawer. They floated together through ten feet of air from the kitchen, landing in a thud in her lap with a little too much force, her mind was simply too tired and lazy to give the machinations any finesse. She grimaced as the freezer burn of the container rained ice

flakes on her blanket.

It was a pitiful and ill advised breakfast, yet it soothed her in a way that seemed to massage the very ache in her heart. She moaned at the sweet taste and pulled her blanket up against her chin.

El's listless eyes, unsatisfied with what she'd been able to find on Netflix, shifted toward the scattering of old dvds from her teen years on the shelf below the TV. Covered in dust, their titles were still apparent as they called out their untold lies. She had them all. Disney movies and rom coms. Fantasies and historical dramas. Indies and grand blockbusters. All threaded with the same story in different weaves over and over again.

A story that El, once again, had to remind herself was strictly not for her.

Especially not this time. Especially not now.

It was the story she knew too well. Her own. The story of a girl who wanted nothing but to fall in love and bare everything about herself to someone who would accept her, just as she'd seen played out on the screen so very many times. Yet there was too much about her that she couldn't share. So much about her that was more difficult than any story was every willing too tell. So many ways that it was all too unsafe. And all very very unfair.

El bit back the tears that stung her eyes as they threatened to fall yet again.

It felt absolutely silly to think about it now, knowing the limitations that she required. But she couldn't shake it.

Because she had never, not once in her life, felt something like that before.

It had swam through her veins with endless reverie all through Monday night as the world had afforded her a second chance to spend time by his side, this time on an even playing field. And she couldn't deny it. His presence was calming. Both simple and exciting at the same time. An explosion of dualities that seemed to collapse

into each other into a perfect harmony.

For once, she'd felt what she thought was, maybe, just maybe, what they explained in the movies she'd held so dear.

Most of life's experiences had been explained to her through movies, to be honest. After a childhood behind closed doors, she'd had a lot of catching up to do, and life in a remote cabin with only one other person didn't really afford much exposure. So instead, El had lost herself in everything she could watch, sucking up life through the stories as though they were her own.

Two genres had become her favorites. Fantasy and romance. In one, she could see representations of herself. Role models, if you will. Fictional bearers of the same secret she possessed. Superheroes and wizards and Jedis and enchanted elves fighting evil with enhanced yet deadly good. It felt like a roadmap for an identity that had none.

And then there was the romance. A roadmap for an identity she craved, but could not hold at all.

Sure, El had dated from time to time shortly after moving to Indianapolis in her late teens, but it had always ended with a simple lack of interest. None of the sparks she'd learned to seek had shot off in her body, not a single time. Maybe her expectations had been raised too high. A common pitfall of too many happy endings.

But this time... this time she'd felt a spark, or something like it. It had felt like an invitation from inside of her. A burning request to explore the kind man with the darkest eyes she'd ever seen.

Or... as she was trying desperately to accept... not.

A heavy banging on the door drew her out of her mind.

"Ellie, open up!"

El groaned guiltily at the arrival of Max's voice. Truth be told, it had only been a matter of time.

"Ellie, are you dead in there?! What the hell?!"

"Coming!" El finally called, her voice cracking from misuse as she grumpily tossed off her blanket and dragged her body up from the couch and toward the door.

She hardly had the door open before Max's voice cut right through. Her eyes were scrutinizing and her voice was a little too honest for El's liking, "Wow, Hopper. You look like shit. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," El said quietly, hiding her face halfway behind the door as she leaned against it.

"Okay..." Max replied, clearly not buying it, "Why haven't you been answering my texts? I've been trying to get ahold of you since Tuesday."

"I've been sick," El groaned, the words feeling right though they were an outright lie.

"Yeah, I can see that," Max said plainly, "What the hell happened to these lights? Did someone vandalize your house?"

El sighed as a now familiar acid once again bubbled in her gut at the topic, "Long story."

Max took a step in around El and surveyed the space with a scrutiny that only a good friend would. "Okay, Hopper. I love you and support you but this doesn't look like you've been sick. This looks like you're moping."

"How – " El stuttered, her eyes going wide in surprise.

Max pointed to the kitchen table as she stared at El plainly, "Oh, I don't know, maybe the pile of empty Eggo and ice cream containers tipped me off?"

And with that, El sighed and shut the door, caught in the act.

"What the hell happened Monday night?" Max asked.

"I –" El started and stopped, stuttering on words she couldn't say. "I'm sorry I didn't text you back," she interjected suddenly, "Did you have a good night Monday night?"

"Oh, I had a great night," Max replied casually as she made her way to the sofa, "I never thought trivia would actually be fun. It's way more fun when you're winning."

"I know..." El sighed, "It was."

"I'm sorry I disappeared," Max said, a hint of guilt in her eyes as she sat, "I should have let you know but I..."

"No, I get it," El said, shaking her head as she held up her hand for Max to stop her unnecessary excuses. Her body directed her back beneath her blanket in her molded corner of the couch as she continued, "Will... that was his name, right? Will told me that you two were uh... 'busy' in the hallway. How did *that* happen?"

Max smiled. A sweet blush brushed her cheeks in a shockingly un-Max way as she averted her eyes for a quick moment. Something surprisingly light entered her voice as she bit her lip, "I honestly don't know. It was weird, right? When I met Lucas at the field we totally hit it off, but after we jumped he wouldn't even look at me."

"Yeah," El replied dryly, "Because you mocked him all the way down while he screamed."

"Right, good point," Max replied with a snicker, "But uh... yeah, it took a couple drinks, obviously. But he lightened back up and um... things just kind of hit back off between us like the first time."

It faded away momentarily, El's own sadness, as she saw the look of excitement twinkling at the edges of Max's eyes, "He's a nerd, alright," Max added as she leaned back and rolled her eyes, a secret in her expression as she side eyed toward her friend, her voice going low, "but he's a great kisser."

"Yeah?" El asked, her mood rising along beside her friend.

"Yeah," Max said with a nod, "BUT, enough about me," Max smirked, her wall closing back up in an instant. "What happened with Mike?"

El sighed, almost cringing as the attention instantly relayed back to her.

"I mean, that *had* to have ended well," Max added, "It was obvious from the second we ran into him that he thinks you're a goddess."

"A goddess," El said quietly, her eyes tracking down to her hands as she found no more energy to lie, "I... uh... I can't see him again."

"Wait," Max said, her eyes going wide with surprise, "What do you mean? Did he do something to you? Because I will legit fuck him up if he – "

"No!" El replied instantly, almost laughing at the absurdity of the assertion, "He didn't do anything. I just – "

El stopped herself. How was she to explain?

How was she to explain that her brain had betrayed her in front of this guy, for a second time? That her brain had exploded the light fixtures? That before, her brain had shot him into the air? That her stupid reckless brain, which she had had almost complete control over for her entire life, was suddenly acting out, changing the rules on her, and exposing her every single time she saw the guy?

How was she to explain to a girl who knew nothing about her secret that she wasn't safe to him, to herself, or to anyone?

She couldn't.

"I just... it's just not going to work," she finally stumbled, her voice taking on a stubborn tone that felt thick and necessary.

"Okay..." Max replied carefully, "Are you getting cold feet or something? Because you... you do this, you know."

"No, I don't," El replied harshly, her walls strengthening against her friend as she pulled herself deeper beneath her blanket. "I just... I don't know. Something feels off."

"Off," Max repeated dryly, her eyebrow cocked with suspicion.

"Yes. Off," El replied, her voice laced with pure defense.

"Off like that blonde guy last year who tried for three months to take

you out and you said no because he was, what did you say? A mouthbreather?"

"Max..."

"Off like that gorgeous guy two years ago that you turned down after he sent you flowers because he lived 'long distance?' Because you somehow seem to think that 'long distance' is the other side of town?"

"Max, I - "

"Off like that pilot who spent a year trying to get on your good side and you refused to even learn his first name?"

"Listen!" El finally bellowed, "Just because you'd date these guys and I decided not to doesn't mean that there's something wrong with me saying no!"

"I didn't say that!" Max quipped back, her hands in the air in surrender. "It's just... this time... El, I just don't want you to get in the way of yourself if you actually are interested."

"You don't know what you're talking about," El said grimly, her voice dripping with self reproach.

She reached for her ice cream almost like a security blanket as Max fell quiet for a moment.

"Look," Max finally said, her voice softer this time, "I know I tease you for not dating and keeping everyone at arm's length. And I'm sorry. I'll stop it, I promise. But this one? This time you actually seem like you're stopping yourself from something that could maybe, just maybe, *be* something. And I really don't understand why."

Tears itched at El's eyes without warning as Max's words struck her square in the chest. She blinked and kept her hands trained down hard onto her hands.

"Okay," Max sighed softly as she pulled herself closer to her friend. Her touch against El's shoulder made her jump, "I really have no idea what's going on, but I think I know the remedy." Max leaned forward and picked up the remote. Then, she leaned back, pulled El into her

by wrapping her arm around her shoulder, and kindly asked, "Do you want Eternal Sunshine or The Notebook?"

"Eternal Sunshine," El replied instantly, "Fits my mood better."

"Well then, Eternal Sunshine it is."

El watched the screen mindlessly, her eyes focusing on the colors in an attempt to bleach the rise of emotions from her heart, as Max toggled through the streaming options until she found the title. Max rubbed El's shoulder with a comfort that she desperately needed as she pressed play.

"El Hopper," Max said sweetly, "A love story for every mood."

"Shit," Mike cursed under his breath. "Five minutes left!"

The students in the lecture hall rustled for the first time in over an hour. A chorus of quiet groans and gasps echoed like a wave across the room. Pencils began to scratch faster. Papers began to shuffle louder.

Mike groaned in shame. The moderator of the final losing track of time was not exactly a good precedent to set if he had any hope of being promoted to actually teaching the class next term, as a head TA. Yet, that fact hadn't seemed to matter as he'd paid absolutely no attention to the students in his room for a full two hours, and instead stared helplessly at his phone.

It had been an ordeal that had taken all of his attention.

Hi El, it's Mike. Just checking if you're okay.

Too motherly.

Hey El! Mike here. Have you had a good week?

Too casual.

Hi El! Wanted to make sure you got my text from two days ago at 1:47 pm on Tuesday.

Okay, he'd just written that as a joke.

It was ridiculous, how jittery digital letters on a digital screen could make him feel. But he couldn't help it. He couldn't help his jumpy fingers that seemed deadset on misspelling every single word he typed the entire more. He couldn't help his unsteady heartbeat rising and falling with every new attempt like a sick game. He couldn't stop his brain from reading into the depths of every single potential word until nothing in the English language felt right.

One more try.

Hey, El. It's Mike. Are you free this weekend? I'd love to see you again.

Mike stared blankly at the words, and shockingly, he found that no part of himself that fought against them with screaming defeat. For one, they were true. Secondly, they pulled his desperate focus away from her lack of reply and pushed the conversation forward toward a future date. That was good. And third, likely the most important element of all, they didn't make him sound like a simpering idiot.

Mike breathed out heavily and smiled with relief.

Finally, after so many days, he had an acceptable text within his hands.

"Excuse me?" a voice popped up, cutting like a bullet through his thoughts, "It's been ten minutes."

"Shit," he murmured again as his body jarred back to reality. He dropped his phone on the desk and stood abruptly, attempting to seem like he had some semblance of control, "I uh... I wanted to give you guys a few bonus minutes. But yeah... pencils down. Times up."

Again, a crash of annoyed tones bled through the air of the large lecture hall.

If Mike was any one of these students he'd probably have been annoyed, too.

"Drop your materials here on your way out," he called with as much

authority as he could muster in his altered state. "Grades will be up within one week. Have a good summer!"

One by one, the students packed up their things and ambled past, most of them not giving him so much as a cursory glance as they dropped their final exams into the box on the desk in front of him.

One kid, who reminded Mike bizarrely of Dustin, looked him straight in the eye with pure frustration as he grimaced, "Could've given us more warning, you know. I was taking my time because you're supposed to be on top of that. Communication is useful."

Mike's voice caught in his throat as the kid shoved his test heavily into the box and disappeared out of the door.

Mike made a point to pay attention to the students as they left, and one by one they disappeared, off to a summer devoid of studies. However, inside his head, all he was really doing was physically forcing his eyes forward, and away from his phone.

Which, when he finally looked down when the room was empty, he found to be dead.

Dead.

Mike groaned in annoyance. He lunged for his bag and shuffled through the pockets, grumbling to himself as he came up empty in his search for a charger.

Dead.

No way to send his text.

No way to call the Lyft he'd been planning to take home.

Nothing was ahead of him now other than a three mile walk home.

"Not even mind erasure can keep them apart!" El sniffed dramatically against her best friend's shoulder as Joel and Clementine laughed in the hallway and the credits began to roll, "I want that."

Max snorted, "You want to have a relationship so toxic that you want to erase it from your memory and then have it all over again?"

"You're seeing it all wrong!" El retorted as she wiped her eyes, "I want to have a love so powerful it exists everywhere. All those dimensions! They chased each other *through their brains*, Max. Through their memories! They fell in love again *inside* of each other's minds. Its... its beautiful."

"Okay, sure but – "

"You always wonder why I don't date?" El asked with a dark self-deprecating laugh, "It's because of stuff like this."

"You want an interdimensional love story that transcends time and space..."

"Yes," El confirmed with a laugh. "That's exactly what I want."

"Well, good luck with that. That's not real."

"Obviously it's not real," El replied with a heavy sigh, "And that right there is why I don't date."

"Right..."

"Benny's."

El popped up as an instant sensation coursed through her. It was a hunger. Or something close? But before she knew it she was up on her feet and walking with purpose toward her keys on her hook.

"Wait, what?" Max asked, surprised.

"Let's going to Benny's," El said simply, "I want a waffle."

"Okay, wow. Someone's hungry," Max replied as she shoved up from the couch and followed.

"I just want to get out of the house, I guess?" El said, a little confused by her instant urge herself. She tossed on her lightest hoodie and pushed up her sleeves as she noticed the sun streaming through the

window. "Do you have time to get lunch?"

Max nodded as she joined El at the door. "Yep, I have literally no plans today."

El grabbed her keys and her sunglasses. Then, for the first time since she'd returned home from her dad's on Wednesday morning, she walked out the door.

"Okay, we've got you off the couch and out of the house, success!" Max cheered sarcastically as they reached the sidewalk and began the short trek to the diner. "Are you feeling better?"

El shrugged calmly. A strange yet oddly familiar sensation of focus had overtaken her in such a way that the question seemed to roll straight off her back.

"I'm fine," El replied as her eyes trained forward like a dog on a hunt.

She could feel Max's curious eyes on her.

"Okay..." El replied slowly as she shook her head, "You're an odd one, Hopper."

"I am not!" El scoffed as they rounded they crossed the final street, Benny's side wall now in view.

"Hmmp, okay. Let's see," Max said in a teasing tone, "You eat breakfast food for almost every meal. You pretty much refuse to eat anything green, yet you don't gain a pound. You talk to the TV like its talking back to you. You believe in hilariously bizarre conspiracy theories, but the more normal conspiracy theories hold no weight for you. You're acting like a very calm zombie in a trance right now - "

" - Okay, Max - "

"- Oh!" Max exclaimed, clearly enjoying herself, "And you don't laugh at any of my jokes. Like, you full on dead pan stare at me ninety percent of the time, but every once in a while I say something that isn't funny at all and that's when you laugh. And then you laugh so hard that you hurt yourself. I will never understand your sense of humor."

"Okay, fine. I'm weird," she conceded simply as she rounded the corner toward the front door of the diner.

"Hey!" Max said, "Don't get me wrong. It's definitely why we're friends. We're both – oh!" Max gasped, "Would you look at that."

Max's voice trailed off just as El's feet stopped dead in their tracks.

And in an instant, the oddly familiar sensation in El's bones suddenly took on a name.

No no no no no this can't be happening no no no no no

El's stomach and heart shot up into her throat and fought for the minimal space in a manner that almost choked her as her face began to flame with both shock and shame.

Because, for the first time in as long as she could remember, for the first time since she had been a *child*, El had tracked someone.

It had crashed into her stomach like a rusty and long forgotten honing beam. A quiet yet undeniable GPS beeping inside of her with no option to ignore. The ability had shot awake from nowhere and everywhere within her all at once as Benny's had materialized like a pop into her mind.

It was a sensation so old and so forgotten that it hadn't even been clear until it was done.

And now, here she stood, shaking and shocked, directly in Mike Wheeler's wake.

He hadn't seen them yet, and in that moment her brain attempted to force an escape. Just because her body had brought her here didn't mean she needed to say, right? Yet, her eyes would not leave him and her feet would not listen enough to move.

He was walking slowly toward them. His hands were shoved into the pockets of well fitted slacks, and his eyes were trained down onto his feet. His hair was tousled, dark and thick and setting off his pale features in such a way that it seemed to highlight the darkness in his expression. His glasses were dipped just a bit off of the bridge of his

nose, giving him the look like he was exhausted. While his clothing looked professional, a dark green sweater, sleeves pushed up along his trim arms, grey slacks and a leather messenger bag hanging from his arm on his side, the hunch in his shoulders seemed to read the opposite.

Something painfully ashamed bubbled in El's gut as her eyes stitched onto him and refused to let go.

"Mike! Hi!"

El cringed and pressed her eyes shut in surprise as Max's voice cut through the air with a sense of joy that seemed to ooze through the air. When she opened them again, she was surprised to find her gaze fell directly onto his. Wide eyed surprise met her with a and a sudden smile, and in an instant he seemed to grow a foot as he stood up straight and began to close the twenty feet between them.

"H-hi!" he called as he waved, his voice lilting.

El waved weakly on instinct as Max hissed, "Did you know?"

"How could I know?!" El whispered frantically, her palms sweating as the idea was put into the air.

"Okay," Max replied quickly. "Well, I'm in charge now because you're hopeless and clearly so is he."

"Max," El gasped, "What are you- ?"

But there was no stopping her as she waved again, grabbed El's arm, and closed the gap between them.

"Mike! What's up?" Max said with a casual effortlessness that sounded so incredibly real but was clearly, to El, so incredibly fake.

Mike tousled his hair from his eyes and pointed behind them, his gaze falling onto El as he answered Max's question, "I was just walking home from teaching,"

"Teaching, huh? That's interesting. Take a break and have lunch with us!" Max said happily, "We were just going to duck into Benny's. Ellie

here needs a waffle fix."

"Hi," El said bashfully, her stomach turning flips in every which direction, attempting to both escape from the situation and pull herself in closer to him at the same time.

There was going to be no room in there for a waffle, that was for sure.

Mike, however, didn't seem to need convincing. "That'd be... that'd be great. If that's okay with you?" he asked, his eyes trained back on El.

Nothing was said in that split second as they looked at each other, but she could read he wasn't saying in the subtlest depths of his expression. It was there. Behind his smile, behind the sparkle in his eyes, there laid a hesitation. It was one that had likely been on *her* face just a few days prior in very similar moment on Monday night. A kind mask that worked as a cover for all the confusion of unrequited interest, of ignored communications, mixed signals, and potential disappointments.

"Ellie?"

Max's voice cut in through her frenzied thoughts with such sharp force that she jumped.

"Sure! Lunch, yes," El forced herself to chirp, nervousness and surprise peeling off of her in a flood as she pressed her lips into a smile in Mike's direction, "Of course."

"Oh. Okay, great," Mike replied softly, his feet unmoving as his lips curved up in grateful relief.

"Okay, iiiin we go," Max said after a spell, her tone highly amused as she moved El in a shooing motion toward the door. "Have you been here before, Mike?" Max asked as she shunted the now trio toward a booth in the back corner. She all but forced El to sit on the inside before she took a seat beside her, effectively trapping her in, and laid out menus for everyone.

"No," Mike replied as he accepted the menu from Max's hand and took a look around, "I've walked past here hundreds of times but I

never thought to stop in."

"Well, welcome to our spot," Max said happily, "Or, El's spot is more like it. I'm pretty sure they're going to put her picture on the wall at her thousandth waffle."

"Max..." El growled as she continued to work on steadying her breath, her flight mechanisms triggering with every slip of her gaze in Mike's direction.

"Oh, whoops!" Max said suddenly. She jumped up from her seat and grabbed her bag in a flurry. "Shit Ellie, I'm so sorry, but my mom's calling and I *just* remembered that I was supposed to help her move some things out of the storage unit today."

"Max!" El quipped in sudden desperation.

"Gonna have to take a raincheck!" her traitor of a friend sing song-ed as she waved goodbye, "At least you have Mike here to keep you company."

"M - "

"Bye, Mike!" she called, already halfway to the door, "Nice to see you. Have a nice lunch!"

El watched in shellshocked horror as her Max practically skipped out of the door of the restaurant. Through the wall of windows, she watched in full view as Max rounded the corner and pocketed her phone. Her face was positively beaming. Her red hair danced as she walked in a way that almost felt like it was mocking El. As she neared the window beside El, she shot her a big thumbs up and a wink before she quickly disappeared down the street.

El looked back to find Mike equally stunned.

"Well, that happened fast," he said with a laugh.

"Yeah..." El replied, her brow furrowing as she snuck a final look out the window.

Awkwardness hung thick and tense above the table as El turned back

and realized, with completely clarity, that she was now alone, staring at the man she had told herself she could never see again.

"It's uh... it's good to see you," Mike finally said, his eyes hopeful as he spoke, "Are you feeling better?"

It was curious, but something soft within his voice spoke with a sincerity that made something within her chest cool from a frenzy to a loud purr. Her eyes swept up to meet his but words did not register on her lips.

"Um.. after Monday night?" he added helpfully.

"Oh, yeah," she stuttered, her brain whirring back to life, "I just drank too much," she said with an awkward shrug.

"And projectile glass didn't really help," he added with a light laugh.

El forced a laugh that felt a little too fake as she cringed at the memory, "Yeah. I got that fixed by the way. It's all fine now. Crazy wiring, I guess."

Mike's forehead creased at her words. He bit his lip for a short moment as his gaze penetrated on hers, but it only lasted an instant before his face shifted instantly back to normal and he nodded, "Right. Really crazy wiring."

"Yeah..." she breathed unsteadily.

The conversation then fell off yet another cliff. It was loud inside of her mind, screaming voices that sang endless conflicting truths, so much so that no words could filter through the din. El's palms began to sweat as she stared in his eyes and felt her tongue stuck uselessly against her teeth.

Well, at least if she couldn't avoid him, she clearly had the next best thing.

Self sabotage.

"Is this..." Mike stuttered, almost looking pained as he seemed to register her discomfort, "Is this okay? You don't have to have lunch

with me just because your friend seems to have set us up, It's okay, I
- "

"No!" El stuttered, her voice finally finding her tongue, "It's uh... no, it's good to see you. I'm just surprised."

And surprised she was. Her heart was hammering like a jackhammer. The hairs on the back of her neck were tingling in a way that made her weak. She felt like she was one bad move away from floating straight out of the seat.

And throughout it all he was looking at her with the softest, most relieved, smile.

"Okay, good. But, is everything okay?" he finally asked curiously.

"Yeah," she replied instantly, "Just..."

I can't control myself around you and I'm blowing over a decade of cover here and you're dangerous to be around but now that I'm around you I don't want to step away because you're the cutest guy I've ever seen in my life and I'm dying on the inside and -

"Hey, Ellie!" a familiar voice cut in beside them, "Know what you want?"

"Thanks, Benny," El said with a sense of abject relief as she looked up to find her saving grace standing at the edge of the table. A large bald man with the kindest face she'd ever seen. Her purveyor of endless waffles. The cherubic harmless version of her father. Benny. Her savior on this sunny Thursday afternoon.

"Thanks for what?" he asked curiously.

For saving me from myself because I can't function with this person under these circumstances?

"Illhaveawaffle," she suddenly spit out in a blur, "And he'll... uh..."

"I'll have a waffle, too," Mike replied easily as he folded up his menu and handed it to Benny.

"You will?" she chirped in surprise.

"You do know that it's lunch, right?" Benny added toward Mike with amusement. "I mean, I get her. She's a lost cause. But you?" he asked, looking over at Mike.

Mike shrugged, "El tells me you make the best waffles and I trust her. So, I'll have a waffle."

The traitorous part of El's heart forced a giggle from her mouth so loud and instant that it startled her. Mike's eyes grew wide in her direction as Benny snorted and disappeared back into the kitchen.

This was going so horribly wrong...

"You uh..." she stuttered, her tongue too thick in her mouth, her voice sounding an octave too high, but a kernel of a topic bubbling through her frenzy, "You said you just got done teaching? What um... what do you teach?"

"Oh," Mike replied helpfully, "I'm a TA, I help teach a physics 101 class. I'm getting my Masters in Physics. Though, today was the last class so I guess this lunch is the official start of my summer."

"Oh!" El replied in surprise, "Well, uh... happy summer, then."

Mike laughed bashfully, his eyes darting upward as his teeth pulled against his upper lip, "I'd say its starting out pretty well," he said quietly as he gestured toward her, "All things considered."

El felt her cheeks flame as the fear in her gut was dealt a fatal blow.

"So, what... what got you into Physics?" El asked, surprised at herself for the very natural and normal person follow up question.

"Oh," Mike shrugged, "I've always been interested in that kind of stuff. How the world works, you know? What everything means. Where it can lead. Stuff like that. But I just really attached to it a few years back, sophomore year of college. I needed something to focus on. Some uh... some stuff had happened and so I just kind of threw myself into my studies. What uh – what made you becoming a skydiving instructor?"

"Same thing, I guess," she heard herself say with a shrug, "I needed something to focus on, too, but instead of throwing myself into my studies I just threw myself out of a plane."

Mike laughed with a sudden shock that made her jump. She felt her own lips quirk in reply. His laugh filled her chest to the brim in an instant, and it became infectious. And suddenly, finally, through a simple crack that felt like a physical valve, fifteen minutes, three days, two weeks of tension all spilled out on her laugh as the ridiculousness of her words sounded through her own mind.

And when his eyes finally reopened from laughter, she was hit with the most brilliant smile she had ever seen.

"Okay, so other than throwing yourself out of a plane, what drew you to it?" he finally asked, a giggle still dancing on his words.

"Oh, I uh..." El took a deep breath as she pushed her hair behind her shoulder and finally, fully arrived at lunch with Mike Wheeler. "Well. It was the first thing I found that made sense to me, I guess. I um..." El eyed Mike carefully as her chest began to ache with words it was suddenly, and very oddly, dying to say. They slipped through her guard with an ease that wasn't absolutely abnormal. "I had a... Some stuff happened when I was a kid that made it so I didn't go to a real school until 9th grade."

"Oh wow," Mike said in surprise, his face falling as his laughter receded in an instant, "Starting school in 9th grade? That must be rough."

"Yeah," she said with a relieved nod, "I was only in normal school for one year. I finished, but I homeschooled. After that, I tried community college for a semester, but it was the same thing. I just learn better alone."

"Hey, that's okay," Mike said honestly, his tone kind and open in a way that caught her off guard for a person pursuing a Master's degree. "Everyone learns differently. Plus, you seemed to find something you really love and you do it really well. That's all anyone's looking for, right?"

"Yeah," she said with surprise, "I've been a skydiving instructor for a couple of years now. I love it."

"You're really good at it," Mike said with a serious nod.

"Thanks," she replied, "Though, you don't have much to compare me to."

"I have endless people to compare you to. You make facing fear feel comfortable. Safe. That's a... that's a rare gift," Mike said, his tone softer than it had been.

"Thank you," El said softly as she felt herself ensnare, yet again, like every time, into his gaze. She needed to be careful there, though, she reminded herself with a jump.

"I uh..." El stuttered, trying to get back on track, "I was always curious where college would have been like if I'd stuck with it, though."

"Well," Mike said with an easy shrug, "I'm sure there's an alternate universe El that got to have all of those experiences. If you ever overlap you should ask her sometime."

"I'm sorry," El said suddenly, a record skipping in her brain, "What?"

"Oh," Mike said as he rolled his eyes at himself, "I just meant there's probably a world where it happened. Where you went to school. You know, a parallel reality."

El stared blankly at Mike.

"A... parallel reality?" she breathed.

"Oh yeah. Multiple realities? Many worlds interpretation?" Mike offered. When she didn't seem to reply brushed the air with fast hands, a fidget of nervousness seeming to cut through his body, "Sorry, I was about to go all physics nerd on you. I'll spare you if you like."

"No..." El yelped as she inhaled sharply, her heart beating fast for reasons she didn't quite understand, "I'm interested. I just don't know

what you're talking about."

"Oh," Mike said, suddenly wide eyed, "Okay," he leaned toward her as, in an instant, his words began to speed. His whole face lighting up as he talked in a way that made El cling to his every word, "So, there's this line of theory that states that infinite realities are all existing at once. It's like, okay, so, for example, thirty minutes ago I was going to call a car to come and get me, but my phone died. I had two choices at that moment, right? Well, I *could* have chosen to run around and find a charger, or I could have chosen to walk home." Mike reached over to the side and grabbed the caddy of condiments and set it in the center of the table. He pulled out the pepper shaker and placed it on the formica top as he continued. "Now, I clearly chose to walk home and *that* reality ran me into you. Let's say the pepper shaker represents me here, having lunch because I made that choice."

"Okay..." she said quizzically.

"*But*," he said, his finger in the air to make a point, "since there was a choice I had to make, I also could have chosen the other way. I could have chosen to look for a charger and call a car home. Let's say the salt shaker is me if I'd done that."

El nodded as he placed the salt shaker down on another part of the table. "Okay, so Many Worlds Interpretation basically says the other choice *did* happen, and it created another parallel reality. So, I'd exist as the pepper here, and as the salt there. But they're both in existence, in their own realities.

"So, there's a you that's not having lunch with me... in another dimension," El stated, her heart beating fast as her head spun around his words.

"Yeah, exactly," Mike replied, "This salt represents the me that's not having a lunch with you, which is a total shame because this reality is a lot better, clearly."

El let out a breathy laugh. "Total shame. Poor salt."

"Poor salt, indeed," Mike replied with a boyish smile, "So, the thought

is that then *that* reality will now spin out into whatever that reality leads to. And realities will peel off of *that* one, to infinity. Just like they'll peel off of this one, the I'm existing in right now, to infinity."

"So, it just goes on forever..." El said as a sudden decadent shiver melted down the whole of her body.

"Yeah!" Mike replied excitedly, "And that's where it get fun. So, if that's true, and you go back and back and back over the years, there could be realities where..." he shrugged, "I don't know... anything could happen. There might be a reality where I've known you since I was like... twelve or something. There could be realities where you and I have a whole shared history. There's another reality where I'm just meeting right now, two weeks after I met you in this reality. And maybe there's one where ran into each other four years ago. Or twenty years from now."

"Wow..." El breathed.

"So, for you," he said, "that means there's a reality where you're every single thing you ever wanted to be. And realities where you're living every single life you could have ended up living. In every direction. Good, bad and in between. It really goes on and on forever. Those little tiny choices split and split and split over and over again, to infinity and... I'm sorry," he said suddenly as he ducked his head in an instant. "I'm rambling."

"No!" El exclaimed, "It's – "

"- Sorry," he said, "You just got me on a topic I love thinking about."

"No... I..." El yelped, her eyes stitched wide, her breath swelling, her mind bending against his words. El's hand reached out, seemingly beyond her control, and latched onto Mike's forearm, surprising both her and him as she said, "I love this."

"Really?" Mike asked in surprise, his wide eyes tracking down where she suddenly held onto him.

"Yes, really," she replied as she quickly pulled back her hand, "Sorry."

"No, it's okay," he said, his voice laced with the tiniest bit of awe, "It's

just that... sorry... this is usually the point where people, unless they're science or math or sci-fi nerds like me or my friends, and sometimes my friends even, tell me to stop rambling."

"No. I don't think that," El breathed easily, her senses entranced with what he was telling her. The conversation so serendipitous it felt like her head might explode. "Tell me more."

And then, in reply, Mike smiled a smile of such brilliance that it made her entire body melt.

"Okay," he said quietly, his eyes dancing, "Sure."

And that was how the next two and a half hours of El Hopper's life slipped straight by. In a booth at Benny's, a place she had been to a million times, her eyes stitched wide as Mike gloriously spun her brain into a pretzel. There was something about the way he talked, so excited about the very molecules around him, that made the most simple things he said seem exciting.

"Ellie?" a gruff voice drifted through her thoughts, cutting her focus on Mike's lips as he stuttered to a stop, "Sorry to interrupt, but it's closing time."

"It's four?!" El yelled in surprise as she looked up at Benny.

"Yep, you two sure can talk," Benny said as he dropped the check.

She looked up to an empty restaurant and Benny removing his apron.

"I can't believe we... wow," Mike shook his head in surprise as he too took a look around at the now deserted diner, "You didn't have other plans that I made you miss or anything, did you?"

"No," El replied with an easy shrug, "And even if I did, I'm sure I made it in an alternate world."

Mike laughed as he leaned over and swiped up the check in his hand.

"You don't have to – " El retorted instantly, but Mike brushed her off and pulled out his wallet.

"Oh please," he said as he pulled out a bit of cash and laid it down on the table, "You just listened to me talk for two and a half hours straight. You deserve a medal. The least I can do is buy you lunch."

"Okay," she conceded, "but I feel like I just sat through the best lecture of my life. I feel like I owe *you*."

Mike smiled bashfully as he pocketed his wallet. His eyes met hers and in a split second the casual tone of the afternoon solidified into something that made her heart skip, "Well," he said slowly. He took a deep breath and pressed his eyes shut with a sudden rush of nervousness, "You just sat through a lecture of mine. I guess the only honest payback would be for me to sit through a lecture of yours."

El's eyes narrowed in surprise, "Are you saying you want to learn how to skydive?"

The exhale of air from his lungs was quick, frenzied, and completely unexpected. He shook his head in a cringe before his eyes fell back onto hers, "Okay, I'm going to be honest with you. And I don't know why I'm doing this. I think I might be going crazy. But... you helped me face fear that day better than anyone else ever has and... I think it's good for me to do that. Plus, it's summer so I have the time. So uh, yeah. Maybe I could take your class?"

El looked at Mike in surprise as her father's voice bellowed loudly through her mind for the first time in two hours.

You can't risk it.

But... El retorted back, suddenly emboldened, by what she didn't quite know... it *had* been over three hours. And no plates had been smashed. The lights were still functioning just fine. The radio had not slipped into static.

The only thing that was decimated was the waffle in front of her and her resolve.

And in that moment, looking into Mike's eyes, it all seemed so silly. The fear. The confusion. The perceived lack of control. He was just a man, after all. Albeit an incredibly cute and now she knew insanely

smart one with the most gorgeous eyes that made her giddy and weak in the knees from simply looking at him.

But still, just a man.

She knew better now, clearly. That's all she needed. A simple understanding that she needed to be careful. She needed to control. She needed to pay attention.

Easy right?

Mike's eyes shown with a vulnerable nervousness that made her shake and before she could blink her lips betrayed her with an answer that would have made Jim Hopper howl in agony.

"Yes," she said, unable to contain her smile, "Do you want to start this weekend?"

"What. Was. I. THINKING?!"

"What *were* you thinking?!" Lucas echoed in alarm.

"It was him!" Mike yelled, pointing malevolently at Dustin.

"Hey! I was just telling you what *I* would do!" Dustin retorted, his hands in the air in a sign of innocence as he stood shellshocked by Mike's sudden tantrum, "I was *not* trying to actually tell you that you should sign up for skydiving lessons!"

"You literally told me to do that! Three times!" Mike bellowed, pulling his hair out as he paced the floor of the living room. His three friends stared at him in fear as though he might explode. "It was going so well!" Mike exclaimed, "So. Well. She was even interested in all the nerdy stuff I couldn't stop talking about. I could have just asked her out on a date like a normal fucking human being. But nooooo! I had to hear Dustin's terrible advice in my head and then I had to hear it come straight out of my mouth like idiotic self sabotaging word vomit. Oh my GOD!" he moaned, his voice falling short as he began to hyperventilate, "There's no turning back on this! I can't get out of this. She's the fucking instructor. I can't pull out now or I lose every chance with this girl. I - "

Mike's pocket vibrated, interrupting him midstream. His hands shook violently as he dug in and pulled his phone up to his eyes.

And for the first time, her name appeared on his screen.

Hi Mike, it's El. I had a great time at lunch. Thank you! I just realized I don't know your last name. For the registration for Saturday. I'll see you at 9am at the airfield.

Mike groaned as his eyes scanned over his sealed fate.

"What the hell am I going to do?" he breathed with a shaky sigh.

"Well," Will said softly as he dropped his hand in a consoling manner onto Mike's shoulder, "It seems to me like you're going to throw yourself out of a plane."

4. Chapter 4

It was all so very confusing.

Two weeks ago, Mike Wheeler's life had been much the same as it had been for the past few years. Going through the motions of a schedule day by day, hour by hour. Ensconced in habit, pattern and structure. A brain full of numbers and knowledge.

Habitual. Predictable. Easy to control.

Safe.

Mike sneered as he looked around the kitchen table at his best friends, short of breath, the entirety of his carefully cultivated comfort zone in a shambles at his feet.

"You're doing this with me, Dustin."

There wasn't anyone else to blame! That much was obvious. Dustin had planned the birthday. He'd goaded the entire party into the surprise. He'd repeatedly planted the idea into Mike's head to take El's class! And somehow (it was the only rational explanation, after all) he had made the idea fall from Mike's lips with some kind of sorcery at the most inopportune moment.

It was all Dustin's fault.

It couldn't have been anything else.

No, it couldn't have been the ease Mike had felt within El's piercing honeyed gaze. It couldn't have been the fluttering ache in his chest, silently pleading for more, as her eyes crinkled into her absolutely precious smile. It couldn't have been the stunning fearlessness that washed over him whenever her tinkling laughter drifted into his ear, a daze so strong it made him make decisions that he never in a million years would have made otherwise.

It couldn't have been any of that. Not at all.

It was clearly Dustin.

"You're doing this with me," Mike barked, his throat tight and dry. "You got me into this."

"I did *not* get you into this!" Dustin cried, almost laughing as he leaned against the wall of the kitchen, knocking the calendar askew. "I merely arranged a *perfect* birthday for you. One that *just so happened* to introduce you to this dream girl of yours, might I add. You were under no obligation to take my advice. I don't know if you know this, Mike, but you have sovereign choice in your life and I -"

"- You're doing this with me," Mike repeated, his voice colder than before. "If you're so keen on telling me to take her class why don't you want to take it yourself?"

Dustin huffed and rolled his eyes beneath his curly mane.

"Well, I'm not doing this alone," Mike interjected impatiently. He turned instantly to his right. "Will?"

"I would," Will said with an apologetic shrug, his eyes earnest and a little worried. "I really would. But I have a commission deadline Monday so I'll be painting all day Saturday."

"Lucas?" Mike asked, his voice hitching as his hands began to shake. "Please?"

"Oh, hell no," Lucas replied emphatically. He waved his hands in front of him and leaned back in his chair in a clear attempt to get as far away from the conversation as possible. "There's no way in hell I'm ever jumping out of a plane again. Plus, I can get a date without jumping out a plane. I'm good."

Mike sighed as his eyes narrowed back onto Dustin.

Dustin fidgeted uncomfortably under the weight of Mike's uniquely heavy gaze. "It's not like I wouldn't want to. I just... It's different when you have to jump alone without an instructor."

"No shit!" Mike bellowed. "And we're going to find out what that's like. Together."

"You should do it, Dustin!" Will said encouragingly.

"Yeah, you were the most excited about this from the start," Lucas added, his words fortifying Mike for the first time in an hour, "You basically talked every single one of us into doing it. And I, for one, am never going to forgive you for it."

"But you met that girl!" Dustin argued, his expression suddenly incredulous.

"And I thought I was going to die!" Lucas barked back, "So the whole experience is kind of a wash. Plus, I ran into her anyway. I could've met her without risking my life."

"You didn't risk your life," Dustin scoffed.

"Felt like it!"

"Back to the point!" Mike cried.

"Okay, fine! I'll do it with you."

"Thank you!"

"But you owe me," Dustin said, his voice shifting to an instant tone of negotiation.

Mike groaned, "What do you mean 'I owe you'?"

Dustin took a moment. He looked between their friends before his eyes trained back onto Mike. He took a deep breath and raised his hands slowly in a placating manner. When he spoke, it was slow and deliberate.

"Mike. If you can find it in yourself to jump out of a plane, you can learn how to drive again. It's been over three years."

The words hit Mike in the gut, hard. All color leached from his face on instinct.

But something, likely his ineffable stubbornness, took lead of his mouth before he could think.

"Fine! Deal."

"Holy shit..." Will gasped from his side.

"Is he in love with this girl or something?!" Lucas chimed, his eyes wide toward Will.

Mike didn't see any of that, however. For, as soon as the words had left his lips he shot from the table and stalked from the room, leaving his three best friends shocked in his wake.

El looked into the mirror of the training center's bathroom, long and hard. She pulled her hair up carefully and tied it into a clean ponytail. Then, without even dropping her hands, she instantly ripped the tie from her hair and shook it out. She tried to smooth it behind her ears. She tried changing the part. She tried a bun and then a braid. Finally, with a sigh, she returned it to the same clean ponytail from her first try and dropped her hands dejectedly to her sides.

It didn't matter what she looked like, she reminded herself with a cold gaze directly in the mirror. It was just like any other day. Her students were just like any other students. They were all people who would remain students, nothing more than students, until the end of time.

El looked pointedly away from her reflection as her heart sank again.

Did he *have* to be just as student?

She'd spent *hours* with him just two days before. Not a single thing had gone haywire! Her brain and body had behaved themselves perfectly well! Like an absolutely normal human being! *Well, except for the fact that she had accidentally **tracked** him to that location, but still...* Maybe she just needed to get used to him. Get to know him better. Right? Maybe, like cold water against her skin, he'd been shocking at first but would eventually become familiar to her senses. Maybe his newness was already fading off into something more comfortable.

Something less dangerous.

And maybe? Maybe it didn't even matter at all.

El sighed painfully as she felt the now familiar queasy crash within her gut.

Two weeks had passed since she'd met him... Three meetings had occurred... and one fact remained: not a single time had Mike asked to see her again.

Taking her class didn't count. Obviously.

Maybe he just wanted to be friends?

Friends...

That could work. He was interesting! Entertaining. Goofy and dorky in a way that no one else in her life was. Shockingly intelligent and playful with ideas. Easy to talk to. So adorably cute, with his thick black hair and matching dark eyes and pale sharp features that made it all stand out so...

Okay, no. They could *not* be friends.

"Shit," El groaned.

She leaned deeply against the sink, her stomach painfully twisting into a knot for the umpteenth time in the past 36 hours. It was a choreographed dance at this point. A unending waltz around the same unwinnable reality again and again and again.

"Ellie, what the hell! Did you fall in? I need your help to finish setting up. We only have a few minutes."

"Coming!"

El sighed and straightened herself up. She looked herself square in the eyes one last time and adjusted the collar on her fitted navy polo shirt in the mirror.

"He's a student," she scolded herself in a harsh whisper. "That's it. That's what he asked to be."

Her eyes rolled dramatically, directly at herself.

"Fine."

She opened the door to the bathroom and murmured an apology to Max and the other assistants, John and Alex, as they flurried around the space to set up for the day.

Max sidled up beside her, a glint in her eyes. She lowered her voice. "Aww, you're nervous! That's adorable."

"I'm not nervous," El sneered. She stalked quickly to the wall of folding chairs and began to set up the class table with pointed focus.

"Sure," Max teased, undeterred, as she began to lay out guidebooks in front of each seat.

"It's not like that," El said, not giving her friend the satisfaction of eye contact.

"You impress me."

"What does that mean?"

"This whole oblivious denial thing you're pulling off," Max said with a laugh. She circled her finger in the air and outlined El. "It seems like you can just create it for yourself out of thin air. It's a skill, Ellie, really. It's cute that you can lie to yourself like that."

"We just had lunch," El retorted.

"I didn't even mention him..." Max said, her face morphing into an all-knowing, and infuriating, smile.

El cringed. She kept her eyes resolutely on the stacked chairs, her cheeks suddenly burning pink.

"And you didn't just 'have lunch', by the way," Max added. "No one just 'has lunch' for three and a half hours. What the hell did you talk about for *three and a half hours*?"

"Physics," El said dismissively. She moved with supreme focus to the

next stack of chairs.

"That's it?"

"It's a broad topic! He's an expert! H-he had a lot to say."

Max scoffed, "You listened to a guy drone on about *physics* for an entire afternoon."

"It was interesting!"

"I don't care if you think it's interesting!"

Max dropped the final book on the table and dug her fists into her hips, all pretense instantly gone. "The El I know wouldn't spend three and half hours talking to *anyone*. Except for me and your dad... or a student."

"Well, he is a student so I guess I'm still the El you know," El replied with a dark look.

Max groaned and rolled her eyes, "You know what I mean."

"Can you just cool it?" El whined, almost begging, "People are going to start showing up any minute. Just... let me handle this my way."

"El, if I let you handle this your way, this is what's going to happen. That guy is going to come in here, spend the day with you, chicken out on asking you out *again*, and you're going to do the same. Then he's going to disappear off of the face of this Earth forever."

"Have you ever thought that maybe that's what he wants?" El quipped, her voice suddenly jumping an octave. She pointedly looked away to straighten a chair for the third time.

"See! There's that oblivious thing you're so good at doing! It's adorable, really."

Then, Max grabbed El's arm and tugged her lightly. El looked up toward her friend in surprise, her eyes skittish.

"El," Max said slowly. "I'm going to spell this out for you. He enrolled

in your class because he is a unique level of chicken shit and somehow jumping out of a plane is easier for him than asking you out."

"That doesn't make sense," El said, her nose scrunched up in annoyance. "Why would someone do that?"

"I have literally no idea. It's fucking weird, but it's clearly what's happening."

"That's not what's happening and we're done talking about this," El's expression turned cold as she wrenched her arm away from Max's grip. "We have four students today. A couple, and two single men who are friends."

"Oh!" Max laughed, her eyes wide with sudden amusement. "You're switching to the whole 'I'm your boss' thing now. Cute tactic, Hopper," Then suddenly, as though her brain had finally caught up to her snark, Max's ears seemed to perk. "Two single men who are friends, huh? Lucas?"

El gasped playfully, a bit of tension releasing from her jaw as she shook her head with a knowing smirk. "Nope. Dustin. Why...?"

"Curly hair. Big smile. Loud voice?" Max replied with an instantly dejected sigh. "Figures that Lucas would be too chicken."

"Can you blame him?"

Max shrugged, ducking her head away, "I just thought maybe he'd have changed his mind is all."

"You're a hypocrite, Mayfield!" El cried as her anxiety cracked into a smile, the tables finally turned. She poked her friend playfully in the ribs. "You talk such a big game, giving me all this shit. Now just look at you." El batted her eyelids mockingly. "Lucas?!"

"No! Stop it!" Max yelled, her face instantly flaming. "I'm – "

But at that moment the bell on the front door tinkled and El's eyes shot up, all memory of Max's hypocrisy instantly erasing from her mind. Her stomach somersaulted violently as she met a surprised set

of dark eyes.

"Okay, Wheeler. You're going to go in there and what are you going to do?"

Mike grimaced and pressed his head deeper against headrest of the passenger seat. "I'm begging you, please spare me your lame Steve Harrington pep talk."

"But they work!" Dustin retorted, his energy much too peppy for their 8am Saturday morning drive. "Just humor me. Okay. So. You're going to go in there and... what are you going to do?"

Mike hid behind his hand as he muttered, "I'm going to go in there and not act like an idiot and actually ask El out."

"Good! And how are you going to do it?"

"How would I know that? I have no idea how the day is going to play out!"

"You have to have a plan!" Dustin cried, drumming against the steering wheel dramatically. Mike cringed and tightened his seatbelt in reply. "Even if you deviate from the plan, you *have* to have one. It keeps you honest."

"I'll... get her alone at lunch," Mike said weakly.

"Meh..."

Mike looked over at Dustin darkly, "What, is my plan not good enough for you?"

Dustin shrugged, "I mean, it's fine I guess, but this situation has gone on long enough. Maybe do something bigger. Ooh! Ask her out in the air!"

"Oh God, I am not asking her out in the air. What if she says no?"

"Oh buddy, she's not going to say no," Dustin said. "Well, or... at least I don't *think* she's going to say no. But... you're right, maybe she will

say no... so... yeah, the air is probably too much. Fine, lunch is fine, that will work I guess."

"This is the best pep talk of my life," Mike deadpanned. "I feel so pepped. Thanks, Dustin."

"Anytime buddy. Now let's get in there, push you out of a plane, get you that date, and then teach you how to drive again."

"Jesus. One step at a time," Mike said, his voice and breath suddenly short at the reminder.

Mike closed his eyes as a instinctual rush of anxiety crested over his chest in a brand new wave.

It was undeniable and so difficult to forget.

Mike was in deep shit.

Oddly, jumping out of a plane was less horrifying than the other thing that he had somehow, stupidly, disastrously, agreed to that night. Sure, the idea of throwing himself from a plane was daunting. But the idea of putting his hands on a wheel again? So much worse.

All Mike had to do was research fatality rates to feel fully backed up on his fear. After all, the statistical fatality rate for skydiving .0061. Whereas, driving a car?! 1.12. He needn't hear anything else. His fear was simply statistical and had nothing to do with anything else.

Nothing. At. All.

Unfortunately, however, statistical facts did not seem to be enough to stop his mind from running it's well worn and exhausting paths. Facts didn't seem to stop the flashbacks and nightmares from returning the instant he'd agreed to Dustin's demand. They didn't quell the acid-like anxiety that had begun, yet again, to flow through his veins, making his hands shake and his breath short.

Mike put down the coffee he'd been trying to drink. The caffeine suddenly seemed like a supremely bad idea. He stared straight ahead and let the minutes slink along as he took a series of long deep breaths.

"It's going to be fine," Dustin said, all teasing dropping from his voice as he patted Mike on the arm and steered the car toward the arrival gate.

Mike's chest collapsed in exhaustion at Dustin's attention.

"Thanks for coming today," Mike finally said, all snark gone, meaning it entirely. "I was an ass the other day but... I'm glad you're here. I really am. This was an idiotic thing for me to get wrapped into."

"Honestly, it's no big deal. It'll be fun!" Dustin said encouragingly. "Especially since you've drilled it into my head that the most dangerous part of the day is coming to an end. Now we can get out of this metal and plastic death trap and fall through the sky in a statically safe manner!"

"I've mentioned it that many times, huh?" Mike asked with a hint of a smile.

"Oh yeah. I'll remember those facts for the rest of my life. I hope it comes up at trivia." Dustin replied with a smirk in Mike's direction. He pulled into a parking spot outside of a small single story brick building near the airfield and turned off the car. "You ready?"

"Nope."

"Cool. Lets go."

Mike dragged himself from the car, grabbing his coffee for no other reason than to give his hands something to hold onto. He followed Dustin through the doors. A bell tinkled their arrival as they entered.

" - Lucas?!"

"No! Stop it! I -"

El and Max's conversation chopped off the instant the men walked in the door. Both of them turned toward the door with wide eyed surprise. Max's cheeks flamed in an instant, obvious in the daylight streaming through the window. But to be honest, Mike didn't really notice. His eyes were somewhere else.

Every ounce of anxiety, fear, anticipation and confusion he'd felt over the last many days crashed over him like a wave. They culminated into something completely different and completely new.

This turn of events wasn't Dustin's fault at all.

One single sight of El and everything was clear.

Falling through the sky was going to be a god damned gift... as long as it was with her.

It made him feel supremely unworthy, how simply she seemed to radiate. Her soft brown hair was pulled back, exposing her neck in a delicate sweep toward her collarbone that peeked from the collar of her tailored blue work shirt. Her fingers were wrapped around the hem, toying with it in a fidgety way that once again seemed to hint to an inner life beneath the surface of her constant composure. He had a hard time taking her in, though, because there was something immobilizing about her gaze. Her glittery brown eyes were piercing, direct, and intense on him as he stood in the doorway, possessing a type of focus that made Mike almost feel like she could control him at will.

Which he would, no doubt, consent to. Gladly.

After a short moment she blinked, smiled lightly and waved. Mike couldn't be fully sure if he returned the greeting.

"G-good morning..." Max stuttered, bringing Mike's attention back to the rest of the room. Max gestured toward the table behind her. "Welcome to ground school, boys. Take a seat. El, can you *please* help me in the back?"

"Wha-" El yelped, visibly jumping at her friend's voice. "Oh, yes. Right."

Dustin snickered to himself and led the way as Max and El disappeared through a back doorway. Mike finally found use of his limbs again and followed.

"Were they talking about *our* Lucas?" Dustin asked, his voice low and gossipy as he took a seat.

"I... I don't know..."

The bell at the door tinkled once again and two more people, a couple in their thirties who were almost disgustingly attached to each other's arms, joined Dustin and Mike at the table. Dustin, always excellent in situations with strangers, broke the ice and led a boring small talk conversation for the next many minutes while Mike's eyes drifted across the room, time and time again, toward the same moving target.

El had returned.

She was flurrying around the training room, stopping to speak to the other instructors, helping them carry and lay out equipment, writing a few starting notes on the whiteboard -

"Psst, Wheeler! Stop staring, you creep," Dustin's voice suddenly appeared harsh against his ear.

Mike flinched and scowled in his friend's direction.

Dustin, though? He probably had a point.

Mike's cheeks turned hot. He quickly picked up the provided pen and opened the book to a random page, pouring his attention directly into the words on the page and away from watching her simply go about her day in such an oddly attractive way that was both cute and enticing and casual and -

"Good morning, everybody."

Mike looked up to find El taking a seat at the other end of the table. She looked around the group, finally stopping on Mike. Her eyes lingered, almost seeming to soften, before they snapped instantly away.

"Well, you all know why you're here," she said as she clapped her hands together and picked up the book in front of her. "Let's get started."

And that's how it went along. For hours.

It was intriguing, watching El Hopper, head skydiving instructor, in her element.

Much like the first day they met, there was an air of easy control about her. She seemed to really love what she did, and thus, her teaching came through as approachable and easy to understand.

Well, at least it *should* have been easy to understand. But Mike had to admit, it wasn't easy *at all*. Sure, Mike's eyes were trained on her as she spoke and demonstrated important details about the equipment and positions. However, if he had to admit it? He was certain that he was focusing on all of the wrong things.

His eyes traced the delicate length of her fingers as she wrote notes on the whiteboard. He followed her back and forth across the room as she paced, explaining *something* that no doubt would save his life if he'd just listen. His mind twisted in unsettling ways as she spoke about the science behind skydiving, tossing around phrases he knew so well such as *terminal velocity* and *gravitational pull*, all while demonstrating the concepts with use of her whole body. He got lost in the way that she bent back, exposing her neck as she whipped her ponytail behind her and craned, opening her chest to showcase the optimal positions for wind resistance and drag. He couldn't stop fixating on the exact hook back of her leg, adorably feminine, as she explained the precise angles that a body should shoot for as it came in for landing.

She explained everything expertly and with simple assurance, all while making it all seem fun and undaunting.

She was a great teacher.

...And it was all insanely and unbearably attractive.

Hour by hour, his anxiety about the day bled away as he got caught in her net. He almost laughed at himself for how much he thought he was going to regret this perfectly wonderful day. For, it was easy to forget as he watched her that he was going to have to actually *do* these things in a matter of hours.

Or... make that minutes.

"Okay," El said, taking a step back and grabbing her water bottle after either seconds or hours or days of instruction had slipped by. She unscrewed the cap and looked around the room. "Does everyone think they're ready for the first tandem?"

The nods around the room answered her back as she took a sip of her water and placed the bottle down. "Great," she chirped, her eyes scanning each face. "Remember, we're doing two tandem jumps today. Each of you require three tandem jumps prior to your first solo jump with an instructor. Dustin and Mike, you already completed your first one with us a couple of weeks back, so after today you'll be eligible to start your solo training."

Her eyes landed on Mike then, and for the first time all day, they stayed there.

"Um.." she said, swallowing.

Mike felt himself follow suit, suddenly feeling too constricted in his own skin, a heady anticipation for the upcoming afternoon overwhelming him in a way that he could never have expected. An anticipation to be close to her, to get a chance to spend some more time with her. Even if he had to jump out of a plane to do it.

Mike felt his smile bloom toward her, fear fully bled away.

El blinked fast at that. She shook her head as her eyes darted away. She took a deep breath and, when she spoke, her voice was higher than it had been all morning.

"Okay! Um... time to pair off for tandems. Dustin, um... you'll be jumping with me..."

That's when the record scratched in Mike's brain.

It hadn't even dawned on him, the potential that he might not jump with her again. To be honest, that was possibly the only reason he had agreed to this in the first place. She had made him feel insanely safe that day, and throughout the entire morning of instruction she'd made him feel insanely safe yet again. But now? With this unexpected screaming turn of events? Every ounce of anxiety that

had been ebbed away roared back in like a crashing wave.

Had he done something? Was it just the luck of the draw? Was he going to survive to the end of the day?

Mike didn't even hear who he was assigned to. A flurry of bodies began to move around him. The hum in his ears filled with everyone getting ahold of gear and preparing for the physical part of the day. Mike looked up across the room to find El's eyes on him, but the second that she saw him staring back she quickly looked away and turned back toward her partner... Dustin.

"You ready for this?"

Mike turned around to find Max standing beside his chair. She was all smiles and almost sadistically gleaming eyes. She dropped his equipment onto the table.

"This'll be fun," she said as she pulled up a chair.

Shockingly, it wasn't.

Before Mike knew it, an hour had gone by, and despite shaky hands and his brain's helpless attempts to escape, and he found himself once again in the air inside of the terrifying tin can of a propeller plane, wondering what the fuck he had been thinking to get himself into this mess.

Mike was certain that his discomfort was visible. An aura of red molecules around him screaming his anxiety for all to see. His hands clutched into the foam of the seat as his knee performed an unending dance, in sync with some erratic beat that could not be heard but for inside of his own frenzied mind.

Mike watched with abject terror as the two additional instructors opened the door to the hull. The wind sprinted in, screaming at his ears and making him wince.

"You ready?!" Max yelled, her thumb jacking toward the open door. "We're first!"

Mike swallowed and nodded feebly. He stood up like a man walking

to a gallows, hunched over and stumbling, too tall for the interior of the plane.

El was positioned in a seat beside the exit, directly beside where Max had him stop. He tried to ignore El's presence so that he could, for once, pay attention to the life saving information that Max was trying to communicate. She asked him step by step to demonstrate back to her what needed to be done. Mike did so, shoulders tense, wind whipping against his face, until Max nodded and clicked onto his harness in preparation to move the final two steps toward the door.

"Mike!"

Mike felt a tug on his hand, warm and inviting. He looked down to find El looking up at him, her goggles pushed up into her hair, leaving it spilling out over the top in an adorable mess. She gave him a thumbs up with her hand that wasn't touching his, along with an encouraging smile.

Mike smiled shyly and nodded, almost feeling like an idiot. Finally, he dropped her hand and stepped back, deeply grateful for the vote of confidence.

Yet, maybe it was *too* much of a vote of confidence.

For, at that precise second, Mike tripped directly over his own feet.

Max screamed and grabbed him hard as his body made a lurch forward, directly toward the gaping doorway into the empty sky below.

"Okay, that is NOT the way we disembark!" Max yelled, laughing to herself as she repositioned both of them sideways at the door. "***This*** is how we disembark!"

And before Mike could even so much as take a breath, the world fell out from beneath him.

The swoop of surprise was sickening, lurching his stomach in a way that made him feel like he was about to turn himself inside out. But somehow, through sheer will or luck or whatever else he was able to muster, Mike Wheeler, a clumsy anxious mess of a human, somehow

successfully completed the fall exercise for a full sixty seconds before he pulled the parachute's ripcord and buoyed with Max in the air.

"Terrible fucking attempt at entry, I mean, for real! What were you thinking?! But decent after that!" Max cried into his ear as they were floated down. "You okay?"

"I'm fine...!" Mike called back, trying to hide his grimace as he fought to catch his breath and not allow his panic to take control. "That was... that was okay?!"

"Yeah, it was okay! You did everything right," Max said. "Now we just have to glide down for a few minutes."

"Great," Mike said, sighing in relief.

"I usually like to chat while we glide down!" Max said in a sing song manner, all kind and inviting before she went into for the kill, "Which reminds me! Why haven't you asked my friend out yet?!"

Mike's stomach dropped straight to the ground as his eyes bulged from of his head.

"Wh-what?" he screamed back against the wind..

"You obviously like El! Why do you keep pussyfooting around?!" Max said, her voice cutting into his ear in a way that he could not, for the life of him, escape.

"I...uh..." Mike stuttered.

"Look, if you repeat a single word of this I'll push you from a plane without a parachute next time! That's a promise so keep this to yourself! You kissed her and then blew her off, man! Then you started showing up around her neighborhood which is... WEIRD. And now you're taking her class? That's a lot of mixed signals! You DO see that, right?"

"That... um... Yes?!"

"She likes you! I don't get why but she does! Like, a lot. Do you like her?!"

"I - "

"It's a yes or no question, dude! Just answer it!"

"YES! Yes I like her. A lot. Like *a lot* a lot!"

"Good! So do her a favor and *unmix your signals*! Or else - "

"Or else what?!"

"Or else..." Max cried, her hand suddenly at his shoulder blade pulling tight against his harness. "All I have to do is remove these four little clips back here and you're not attached to a parachute anymore."

"Jesus!"

"I'm kidding, but come on!" she whined.

"O-okay fine! God! I get it..." Mike stuttered awkwardly.

"Great! Glad we cleared that up! And lift your legs!"

"What?!"

"Look down, were here! Lift your - ! Now! MIKE! Lift! - SHIT!"

Max pulled hard above him, taking control and slipping herself beneath Mike's body to take the brunt of the landing. Mike fell back onto her with a thud as they skidded against the ground and finally came to a stop.

"You were supposed to lift your legs..." Max groaned, her voice tight from Mike's weight against her.

"Maybe I would have remembered if you hadn't been *threatening* me!" Mike bit back, wincing at the sharp pain of her heel in his thigh.

"I wasn't *threatening* you. I was simply giving you some much needed advice," Max replied with a huff as she worked him free from the restraints. "But yes, I could've given you a bit more warning. Sorry about that. We'll get it better next time."

Mike crawled to his knees and brushed helplessly at the grass stains he'd collected in the skid against the ground. His stomach was simply twisted. Half of it seemed like it was still in the sky, half of it had plummeted down to hell, unrecovered from the lurch had been their entry into the air, and yet another half (which somehow existed though that was *not* scientifically possible) was jumping with exuberant glee at what he had just learned.

"Max," Mike said. He reached out his hand toward her, biting back a smile. Max took his hand and let him pull her from the ground. "Thank you."

Max smiled back as she got to her feet. She shook his hand before she let it drop, her expression mischievous, "Happy to help, mouthbreather."

Then, she pointed behind him and cocked her head. Mike turned to watch El and Dustin make an effortless landing about fifty feet away.

"Well, she sure knows how to make an entrance," Max mused. "Let's walk."

El needed to breathe. She needed space to air out her chest and clear her mind and to try, somehow, to gain her wits about her.

It had been mounting all morning... Scratch that. It had been mounting for two weeks. And to try to teach for four hours like that? With that swirl absolutely ravaging like a hurricane inside of her skin?

It had been excruciating.

From the moment that Mike had walked in the door, every carefully laid plan that El had created inside of her mind had flown straight out the window. His glasses were once again gone, just like when she'd first met him. His gaze were instantly arresting, like always, in its depth. And now it had nothing to hide behind. It was incredibly difficult to decide if he looked better with or without his glasses. Both? Both.

But there'd been no time for her to dwell on that almost unfair reality.

He'd looked nervous. His fingers were clutched tight to a disposable coffee cup for dear life, his knuckles white. But he'd smiled at her and had seemed to relax just the tiniest bit at her attention. El instantly felt the now familiar heady buzz slip down her spine.

To be honest, that sensation hadn't left her in days.

Remnants had still been left over from those many hours she'd spent simply listening to him talk just a couple of days before. His voice, rich and raspy and excited, hadn't left her ear since that afternoon. It had weaved its way through her silent moments, making her smile despite herself at seemingly nothing at all as she'd gone about her days. It had even slipped its way into her sleep, stirring dreams, foggy and serene, that included him in ways that she was definitely *not* willing to admit.

Mike Wheeler had become inescapable.

And now? Now, he was standing directly in her path, right where she needed to work.

For all of the challenge, El had gotten through the day seemingly well. It was a solace that she could instruct ground school in her sleep, because instructing ground school while a fire raged inside of her was almost as difficult. But she'd managed. Max had jumped in here and there, supplementing when she'd stuttered with a secret knowing glance that made her blush.

Yet, as the hours had passed and her attention had waned, she found her eyes slipping more and more back to him.

He had a habit of chewing on his pen as he listened, scrawling notes in hard-to-decipher chicken scratches whenever she said something that he deemed important. His lanky body was almost too tall to comfortably sit at the table, which meant that he had adjusted into new positions whenever she'd turned around, presenting her with a whole new way to view him every single time she looked back.

More distracting than anything, though, was the burning sensation of his eyes constantly on her, never leaving. Not that they were supposed to, per say. She *was* the instructor. In a way, he had *paid* to watch her talk.

But damn if it wasn't insanely overwhelming.

So overwhelming that El was certain that she would simply jump from the plane and fly *straight upward* if his body was pressed against hers. The expanse of his back pushing into her chest. The scent of him blowing against her from the wind.

Yeah, that *could not* happen again.

So, that's how she ended up here. On flinching reflex, choosing Dustin as her partner in a moment of frenzied panic.

She'd regretted it in an instant, especially when her tongue had slipped and she'd paired Mike with Max. She could've at least paired him with John. That man was nice, calm, and not Max-like at all. She'd regretted it even more as she'd watched him prepare to jump, out of his depths in that way that was, just like last time, so oddly charming.

She *did not* regret grabbing his hand, or the feeling of his fingers as he back latched onto her in an instant, his expression softening as she sent him a quick vote of encouragement.

She *did*, however, regret that it almost made him fall out of the plane...

That was all behind her now, though.

Thank God.

Dustin had handled his jump with ease. He'd executed each exercise with precision and ease, and thus, it had been a simple and straightforward jump. As the parachute buoyed, El found herself grateful for the break. For the fresh air. For the expanse of the sky and the sight lines over the trees and fields of Indiana on a budding summer's day. It was a deeply needed release.

The day was almost over. Only one jump left.

Everything was going to be just fine.

Or so she'd thought.

"That was AWESOME!" Dustin cried as he pumped his fist in the air.

"It never gets less fun, I promise!" El said with a heady laugh as they floated down.

"You're a good instructor!"

"Thanks! I try!"

"- I don't know what Mike was talking about about you flying, though! Seemed just like a normal jump to me!"

...

...

"F-flying?"

Dustin laughed and yelled back, "Mike told me all about the trick you pulled last time! He's been trying to figure out how you did it but he can't. It's hilarious! That shit drives him crazy! I swear he's convinced you can fly."

El choked as her eyes flew wide open, her stomach plummeting to the ground minutes before the rest of her could reach.

"What do you mean he's – um – " El coughed, the wind rushing into her face in a way that she wished would simply blow her away forever as her heartbeat began to wrack like a wrecking ball against her chest, " - he's been trying to figure it out?"

"Oh, that's just Mike!" Dustin shrugged, his shoulder arching up into hers, "If he doesn't understand something he'll get obsessed trying to figure out how it works. You know, scientifically. I get it. I do it too. He hasn't been this stumped in years!"

"He... hasn't?" she asked weakly, her jaw going slack.

"Wait!" Dustin called back, gasping. He threw his hands up in the air and dramatically yelled. "You *can't* fly, can you?"

"NO! No!" El exclaimed, her voice spiking in a shrill and painful manner against her throat, "That's... that's crazy!"

"You did know I was joking, right?" Dustin asked with a confused laugh, "I know I look like an idiot but I do know that people can't *fly*."

"Oh!" El gasped quickly. She laughed, then, or attempted to fake that sounded like a laugh but only came out as a choked gasp, "Right! Yeah! HA! Um... get prepared to land! Lift your legs when I say go - "

El tried to focus on the landing. Thankfully Dustin did as he was told, since at that moment, any deviation from the norm would have been disastrous based on how thick and shocked her brain was. El performed the landing, swooping beneath Dustin and stabilizing them on the ground before her trembling hands quickly undid the latches of the harness and she freed herself as quickly as she could.

El kept her goggles on to hide her terror as she stepped away from Dustin and put her head between her legs, focusing on deep breaths.

What was happening? Did he know? How did he know? Had she been that obvious? If he knew about that he had to have caught on about -

"El? Are... are you okay?"

El snapped up to find not only Dustin, but also Mike and Max, windburnt and grass stained from their recent landing. Worried looks were on all of their faces.

"Y-yeah!" El said quickly, her lips turning up into a manic smile as she nodded profusely. "Hi! Just a little... deep breathing! Um... Max?!"

"Yeah, Hopper?"

El's eyes snapped between the three people standing at attention in

front of her. Dustin, Max, and Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

It was an instant decision. A necessary action. A totally out of the ordinary plan.

"Time to... switch partners!"

"Time to *switch partners*?" Max repeated in surprise.

"Time to *switch partners*!"

El shot Max a look so dark it almost cut straight through her friend. Max's eyes widened, but she nodded in an instant.

"Yep, time to switch partners. Yep, that's what *always* we right now! Every time. You uh..." Max said, turning to Dustin. "You go with me this time. Mike, you're going with El."

"Great..."

El nodded and spun around. She walked as fast as she could through the grass in a beeline toward the boarding area, trying her best to leave them all behind.

She needed a moment to think.

What the hell was she going to do?

El tried to push away the terrifying thoughts as she walked, but they nonetheless forced their way into her mind as a roaring stream of internal screams. What ifs and contingency plans. Paranoid checklists of everything he could possibly already know. Self pointed anger and shame. A sickening sensation of years of cool calm collectedness possibly slipping so easily, and so stupidly, through her fingers. The voice screaming that this was all an overreaction! It was just a joke! Everything was fine! The *other* voice screaming that everything was NOT fine! Everything had NOT been fine in almost two weeks!

El tried to take a deep breath again. It didn't work.

"El!"

El froze, cursing as the same rogue shimmer slid down her spine at his voice once again, despite her current mental meltdown. She forced a deep breath and spun around, plastering a smile on her face.

"H-hi," she squeaked, looking at Mike head on. "How was your first jump?"

"Fine until the end," Mike said, his hair blowing in the breeze as he slowed his trot to match her steps. "Just a... hard landing."

"We'll work on that this time, then," she replied quickly. She felt the grass end and the concrete begin beneath her feet and she sighed in relief.

"Um... can you help me pack the parachute?"

El attempted to pass the moments by relying on the motions of teaching yet again. She had a hope that maybe, just like during the morning, it could work to insulate her as she desperately tried to piece together what the hell she was going to do.

The others arrived, as did the plane, just a short few moments later. El stayed quiet as the group reboarded. Finally, she entered last, and cursed internally as she found that the only seat available was the one directly next to Mike.

This was all a uniquely terrifying kind of torture.

El did not speak as the plane took off and soared to 14,000 feet. She stared straight ahead through one of the small circular window in the hull, her fingers picking aggressively at her nails without any attention at all.

"Are... are you okay?"

El's eyes shot up like a scared animal.

She was met with a look of concern from deep dark eyes so earnest,

and so interested, that a tiny piece of her calmed in an instant, as though it was brushed with a wave of cool water.

"I'm... I'm fine."

Mike's lips were formed into a hesitant first word, but instead he stopped and studied her for a moment.

She swallow hard, trapped like an animal in a cage.

That was when his smile turned playful.

"Are you nervous to jump out of a plane, El?" he asked in a joking manner, his voice light and inviting. "Is that why you're all fidgety?"

"Um... " El uttered, suddenly perplexed and caught completely off guard. She giggling a bit and felt herself nod, "Yes, terrified."

"Well," he continued. He knocked his shoulder against hers, "A wise woman once told me that tandem is easy. All you have to do is trust me and I'll do the rest."

"Trust *you*?" she asked in surprise.

"Yeah. I'm in charge today, right? That's what this is all about? I'm supposed to be showing *you* how this is done?"

El paused, and her brain lit up.

"...You're right..."

That was it.

El's lungs expanded in full for the first time in thirty minutes. She finally smiled.

"You're right," she repeated with a nod, her eyes now directly on his, "Every single thing that happens on this jump will be *your* doing."

Mike smiled back at her, his expression simply brilliant. His eyes darted away shyly as he said, "Well. You know if it gets too scary you can just hold my hand and close your eyes. I'll get us out of it. I

promise."

El bit her lip as her heart fluttered violently, her own words from the first time they'd met mirrored onto her in a way that almost made her tremble. Her fingers bunched up into her pants to stop her from taking his hand right then and there.

There was no denying it.

Mike Wheeler was absolutely precious.

"I'll keep that in mind," El finally said, her voice soft. "Thank you. I feel very safe now."

"You are way too trusting, El," Mike teased. He pushed against her again, his thigh shifting against hers, "You're trusting a guy who almost fell out of a plane an hour ago."

At that, El laughed in full and Mike looked up, his smile self deprecating, hopeful, and a little coy.

"Well, my future is in your hands now," she said with a shrug, suddenly feeling so much lighter that she could simply float. "You promised."

Mike had no idea how or why he had been dealt the winning hand of being switched to jumping with El, but he was surely not going to complain. El's hands worked against his back, checking the connection points of the harness before the final jump of the day. He could hear her breath, fast and tense, and he tried not to read into it. She'd been in charge of a full day, after all. There were probably things going on that he couldn't even begin to understand.

He was just happy that, despite whatever tension she'd been carrying, he'd been able to make her smile.

Mike's hand was latched firm to the metal bar as he looked out onto the expanse of blue and green below him. His stomach succumbed to a familiar wrenching nervousness. But he couldn't help but notice that he could breathe better with El there, and a couple of jumps underneath his belt.

"Ready?" she asked, her breath hot against his ear.

Mike nodded, his head brushing against her.

"Whenever you're ready!" she called.

Mike took a deep breath, somehow found the power within himself to loosen his grip...

...and they were off.

Things spun fast the second that his feet entered freefall. His brain struggled to keeping up as he tried, step by step, to demonstrate the necessary maneuvers of the exercise. Oddly, for the first time, he found the tiniest amount of fun with it. Wind seared his skin as El whooped from behind him, her hand in a thumbs up as he correctly moved through each step.

And then suddenly El yelled something he couldn't understand.

Just as Mike turned to check in with her he felt a sharp swoop rise inside of his entire body as the oddest and most exhilarating sensation overtook him. It was disorienting and it lasted for only a split second, yet its intensity was undeniable. It was unlike anything he had ever felt in his life.

It felt like pure euphoric freedom.

It felt like gravity had no control over him at all...

"RIPCORD!"

Mike fumbled his hands against his chest, snapping back to attention to seek the release system. He pulled it hard, and with it, they had stabilized in the air.

His stomach returned to normal as they swayed in the sky.

"Good job!" El called. "You're almost a natural! *You got some air that time!*"

"How - "

"- How what?"

"How is that *possible*?!"

"How is *what* possible?!"

"The... The going up?!" Mike gasped, the sensation still swimming over him with immense exhilaration.

"I told you last time! It was just the wind!" El said forcefully. "You caught a good stream this time!"

"Th- that didn't happen on the last jump with Max!"

"Well! It - It doesn't happen every time!" El called, "It's not like you or I can *fly* or anything! It's just the wind! It was just the way you turned!"

There was something about the way she said it that made Mike laugh and groan at the same time.

"Did Dustin say something to you?!"

"Maybe!" she cried back guiltily.

"God, he's - he probably made me sound insane. I know we didn't *fly*. I just... I don't know *what* we did!"

"It's just the wind!" She repeated, "No superpowers involved."

"So, you're telling me you're not Supergirl?!" Mike called back jokingly.

"I'm not!" El called back. "Sorry to disappoint!"

"Are you sure?!" Mike cried back in an instant, head still in the clouds, clearly 100% not thinking "You seem pretty super to me!"

El gasped against his ear and instantly couldn't contain her laughter. "Did you just -?!"

"- Stop talking!" He called back, his face flaming. "That was the dumbest thing I've ever said in my life! I- I'm never speaking again."

"Aww I liked it!" she cried back with a purely delightful giggle streaming directly into his ear. Mike felt electricity surge through his body as she leaned into him dropped her head against his. His eyes slipped shut at the sensation, causing -

"Oh!" El cried suddenly, "Lift your legs!"

"What?!"

"Lift up your legs!"

"I - shit - I!"

"Higher! I need to take control!"

"I'm trying, I - !"

But instead, the ground found its way under *Mike's* feet instead of El's. With a surprised gasp directly into his ear, El's legs wrapped tight around Mike's waist as he landed. Her arm reached around his chest to hold tightly onto him like a piggyback ride he never could have anticipated. In a stumble of limbs, his feet dragged against the ground. The force of her body against his took him directly to the ground.

On instinct, Mike struggled to get back up on this feet, but he was not the only one. With a peal of laughter, El lost her footing and fell forward onto him, still attached.

"That was - the worst landing!" she cried as she suddenly began to laugh. Hard.

El erupted in a fit of giggles so loud and joyous that, Mike's, buried into the ground, couldn't help but laugh with her. It was stupidly glorious, the feel of her against him, her laughter growing thicker with each passing second.

"I'm so so sorry," Mike said with a chuckle.

"Are you okay?!" El yelled. Her voice grunted as her finger grappled against his back to release herself from the harness.

"I'm fine..." Mike grimaced back. "I think I only bruised my ego."

At that, El's giggles doubled in an instant. Her head dropped to the back of his shoulders as her weight momentarily disappeared. "Okay, you're free - WHA!?"

A gust of wind blew over them as she moved and, in reply, the parachute lifted and dropped directly on top of their still scrambled limbs, trapping them instantly inside of a world of blue and green.

Mike tried to get up on instinct and El yelped in reply, losing her footing once again and falling into him in a mess of limbs and apologies.

"Here let me – "

"- I think – "

"Ouch!"

"I'm sorry!"

"It's okay! Just move your – Ah!"

"Oh my God! Stop moving!"

Mike froze, the tizzy of the last few seconds finally coming to a halt at her command. It was then and only then that he took stock of their predicament.

As though they were caught in a net, El and Mike had become completely entangled in the cords of the parachute, and, as a result, in each other.

El was pinned against him, her head against his shoulder, her body pressed into his, her leg trapped in a hook around his hips. All the while, her body once again crashing with laughter against him.

"You must think I'm the worst instructor..." she groaned as she buried her face into his shoulder.

"You're a great instructor," Mike replied, his voice thick, suddenly

overwhelmed, "I'm just an abysmal student."

"Nah, you were perfect until the end."

She looked up as she spoke, her face so close to his that he could feel her breath on his chin. Her eyes were a light and her goggles were delightfully askew on the top of her head.

Mike was pretty sure his heart had just taken flight once again.

This was it. This was the moment. So insane and unexpected but so wonderfully perfect.

El's laughter quelled slowly as her eyes grew dark.

"El?" Mike asked, his voice almost a whisper.

She licked her lips and whispered back, "Yes?"

"Do you - "

But before he could continue, a hand tugged hard on the parachute, breaking their tiny bubble and bathing them in sunlight.

"What the hell happened here?!" Max's voice cut through the moment like a knife.

"OH!" El jumped as she craned her neck back. "Hi!" Her body tried and failed to put space between them. "Can you untangle us? We're stuck like this."

"You can't land for *shit*, can you Mike?" Max said with a hint of a tease. "Dustin, help me."

"Oh, gladly," Dustin's voice cut in, making Mike groan in instant embarrassment. "I will be committing this moment to memory so that Michael here absolutely never lives this down."

"I'm so lucky to have a friend like you, Dustin," Mike called out in a groan.

His eyes dropped shut and his heart deflated like a punctured

balloon, his insides burning from the unasked question on his lips.

El was freed first. She wriggled away from him limb by limb until the intimacy of her presence was gone and there nothing was left but empty air. Finally, a hand reached down and grabbed his, his legs finally free.

"Thanks," Mike said quietly as he accepted the help and pulled himself to standing. He opened his eyes to find El, smiling softly, her hand still in his.

And in an instant, without hesitation, Mike surprised himself as he instantly finished his so rudely interrupted question.

"Are you free tonight?"

El froze.

A soft 'oh' escaped on her breath.

...But it wasn't El who answered his question...

"Oh yeah, man!" Dustin called out from the ground. He was crouched two feet away, his eyes focused on the task of untangling the final lines of the parachute. "I was thinking we could go get drinks after this. You know, calm the nerves."

Mike looked back toward El in surprise, "I – I wasn't – "

"Oh can we join you?" Max chimed in suddenly, her attention also on the mess on the ground.

"That'd be awesome," Dustin said.

"You should call you friends and have them join us," Max added.

"Believe me," Dustin replied, "Lucas would *much* rather you invite him."

"But alas, *I'm* not going to," Max said. "Have them meet us at Thelma's."

"Thelma's?" Dustin asked with surprise. "That building that looks like its falling apart down the road?"

"Yes, that one, and I'll have you know that it's amazing," Max retorted. "Cheap, great food, beer, whole room of arcade games in the back."

"What!?" Dustin yelled. "That decrepit building is an arcade bar?"

"Well, kind of," Max shrugged, "Most of the machines don't work anymore but there's a few."

"Okay, sold. This'll be fun."

"You'll come, right El?" Max called out over her shoulder, not looking back.

It was only then that a stunned Mike finally found the courage to look back at El. Her eyes were closed and she was shaking her head, but the smile on her face was radiant and highly amused.

Finally, she opened her eyes again, dazzling hazel meeting his own. She kept her eyes locked on him as she called over her shoulder to Max. "Yes, I'll come. Great idea... Max."

Mike's heart soared and he couldn't help but laugh as he rolled his eyes towards their friends.

El rolled her eyes back in an adorably silent agreement.

"Oh!" El suddenly yelled.

She jumped and looked down between them.

"Sorry," she said sheepish shrug, the slightest hint of a blush gracing her cheeks, "I guess I was scared."

It was only then that Mike looked down to realize that he had been holding her hand the entire time.

I hope you enjoyed chapter 4! Let me know what you think below!

Chapter 5 should a shorter wait. It's mostly written :) Happy December!

5. Chapter 5

She could still feel his hand in hers...

Okay, that might not have been possible. It *had* been three hours, after all. But still! Every mark he'd made on her had been indelible, so maybe it wasn't a huge stretch of the truth. The simple fact was that she couldn't shake it, and in the darkness of her car, she finally let herself sink into that feeling that had been reverberating through her chest for hours. A smile, so painfully large, broke through her control and splashed across her face. She dropped her head back and rolled her eyes with an unrestrained giggle.

She had only been cradled within Mike's embrace for the briefest of moments. It had been a sheer and complete accident. They had literally been *trapped* that way, tied together by *actual strings*. It was a simple hazard of her job.

Yet still. He felt *perfect*.

The press of his body against hers had imprinted itself onto her skin. Her waist still burned from where he'd clutched to her, his fingers gripping into the small of her back to hold her steady since her body was off balance, her leg wrapped and trapped tight around his hips. She had lost the knowledge of how to breathe lying in the crook of his shoulder, the beat of his heart heavy in her ear as he gazed down at her and said her name, his lips so close that he'd only had to whisper to be heard.

The intimacy had been so abrupt, so dizzying, and so *perfect* that she wondered if it had actually ever happened at all. If *any* of it had happened at all. The late afternoon sun, orange and blinding near the horizon, had splashed into her eyes when Max had pulled back the parachute, drowning her in hazy hues that had matched the buzz within her body, leaving her with a sense of blinded punch drunk overwhelm. It was an overwhelm so thick that she hadn't realized she was still holding Mike's hand after she'd pulled him up, and she *definitely* hadn't processed his question as it had floated aimlessly past her ears. Before his question and its potential meaning had dawned on her, voices had chimed in around them. Plans had been made. The

day had wrapped up. The boys had left with a promise to meet them at Thelma's, and the night had arrived.

She hadn't given herself much time to dwell on her confusion, what with wrapping up the day. Equipment had needed inventory and return. Final paperwork had had to be processed. The plane and classroom had required a reset. They were all excellent things to distract her from the question that was bubbling louder and louder within her as each hour passed. Yet finally, as she waited for Max to join her in the car, the question crept up to center stage.

Was this a date? Or not?

There was evidence pointing to each eventuality! The chief piece of evidence, however, was lost to the world: she hadn't been able to see his face when he'd spoken. The sunlight behind him had been so bright, and she had been so utterly gobsmacked, that her focus in that ever-important second had simply been lost.

Her stomach dropped a bit at the repeating realization that he really could have just been talking to Dustin. It all could have been just a silly misunderstanding on her part.

However, she reminded herself with a light slap to her cheek, it was a mystery she needn't try to unravel. For truly, she shouldn't be going on a date with Mike regardless of the circumstances. The current outcome was probably for the best.

"Why *the hell* did you just slap yourself?"

El jumped, her hand gripping at her heart as Max spoke beside her. How or when she'd arrived, situated in the passenger seat of the car, El did not know.

"How many times have I told you not to sneak up on me! It's dangerous!" El cried, her breath short as she reeled in the threads of power back in. It was lucky she'd learned to control the impulse of fear years before, for her car would have otherwise ended in a pile of rubble from Max's scare.

"How is it dangerous?!" Max countered with a confused laugh, "And

Ellie? I've been sitting her for like ten seconds. I didn't magically appear. I opened the door and crawled in like a normal human being. You're just distracted."

"Yeah, I guess I am," she admitted. El was grateful for near darkness, for it worked well to conceal the heated blush that was made its way down past her neckline.

"You're adorable," Max teased, poking El in the ribs, "Look at you with your starry eyes! You're not even on this planet! You know, I clearly should've just left you underneath that parachute."

"Shut up, Max," El groused. She jammed her keys into the ignition and started the car.

"Well, you can continue whatever you were doing tonight," Max said wryly.

El steered her way out of the parking lot and toward Thelma's down the road. "You weren't looking at Mike when he asked about doing something tonight, were you?"

Max snorted a laugh, "No. I don't stare at him endlessly when he's around. That's your thing."

"Maaax."

"Sorry. I'll stop teasing. No, I wasn't looking at Mike. I was trying to untangle the parachute. Why?"

"I just... I couldn't see him," El admitted, "The sun was in my eyes when he was talking and I couldn't... Max, I think he was talking to *me*. Not Dustin. About tonight. I don't know. It all happened so fast and I'm – ugh, it doesn't matter."

"The *hell* it doesn't matter!" Max squealed in an instant. She shifted in her seat, facing El directly. "Tell me *exactly* what happened."

El bit her lip, fighting back a bubbling smile, "Okay. I pulled him up from the ground after we were... anyway, I *swear* he looked at me and said, 'Are you free tonight,' but I could hardly see him and I was kind of a mess. Then, before I could answer or even understand what

was going on Dustin chimed in and then you did and then, well, here we are."

"Ooh, Ellie!" Max cooed in a single song manner, her hands drumming on El's thigh with excitement. "That *does* sound like he asked you out!"

"Maybe," El groaned, almost laughing at herself for the idiocy of it all. "I could've read it wrong, though."

"You should just go talk to him about it."

"Are you kidding me?!" El snapped. "Absolutely not."

"Okay, well..." Max replied, settling back into her seat, "It *does* sound like he asked you out. So, that's good, right? I'm glad he took my advice."

"I don't know. Maybe – WHAT?!"

El slammed on the brakes, both of their bodies racking against their seat belts in a painful fashion. El didn't notice that pain, though. She turned to Max, her eyes narrowed, her voice shockingly quiet as she spoke.

"What do you mean 'your advice'?"

Max cringed in a way that made El absolutely certain that she was going to hate the answer.

"Max," El repeated, her voice wavering in a tendril of fear, "***What did you say to him?***"

"I just – I *just* gave him a nudge in the right direction," Max said quietly, her eyes fixated down on her nails as she picked them.

El's heart began to beat frantically. She turned fully toward Max, their car sitting in the center of the empty road, and stared at the girl head-on. "What does a 'nudge in the right direction' mean?"

"Don't worry about it!" Max bit back. She wiped her hand through the air casually as though that would make it all go away before she tried

to smile through a grimace. "He asked you out didn't he? That's what you wanted, right?"

"I don't *know* if he asked me out because there's six of us going out tonight, and I never told you I wanted that - "

" - Yes you di - "

" - It doesn't matter! What did you say to him?!"

Max rolled her eyes and squirmed in her seat. "I *just* told him he needs to get his head out of his ass and ask you out."

"YOU WHAT?" El bellowed. "When did you do that?"

"When we were gliding down."

"Oh my God, Max," El groaned as she dropped her head into her hand. "Why the hell would you do that?!"

"Because you're both being – "

"You know what! Don't answer that question. It doesn't matter," El barked abruptly. Revving the engine, she shot down the road in an instant lurch, her car making the final quarter of a mile toward Thelma's in record time.

"Ellie..." Max said carefully, "I was just trying to help!"

"Help?!" El exclaimed, wrenching the steering wheel into the gravel parking lot of Thelma's. She veered into a spot and stopped hard, her tires throwing gravel from the impact. "You didn't help! God, this is embarrassing. I - I shouldn't even be here!"

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I – "

El's jaw clamped shut as though it was controlled by an outside force. The real answer had come frightfully close to her lips. In an instant, reality rushed in on her with the intensity of a hot lava spill, burning her insides in the worst way, every pain another glaring reminder of

why this was all a terrible idea.

"Because I'm not you, Max!" El finally cried, tears threatening the edges of her eyes. She ripped the keys out of the car and dropped her hand on the doorknob. "This shit is easy for you, but it's not for me. None of it."

"That's why I was trying to help!" Max cried back, her jaw tight as she held El's gaze.

"I don't need your HELP –" she threw her keys in her purse. "I don't need you abandoning me with people at lunch! I don't need you threatening people to ask me out! I don't need you making me a pity case to the *one guy* I actually like."

"I didn't! That's not –!"

"Stop thinking you know what's best for me!" El threw the car door open. "You don't!"

"Wh –"

"Have a good night, Max."

"El!"

Max's voice muffled through the freshly slammed car door. Heat radiated from El's face as she stalked through the gravel parking lot into the deepening dark, leaving Max as far behind as she possibly could. What had seemed like a fun, if potentially ill-advised, evening now felt like an instant nightmare. While there was no way for her to truly piece out what the hell was going on, her mind tried all the same. Its concoction left her wanting to run the entire way home. Yet she found herself forcefully pulling the door of the bar open instead.

Thelma's was hot, stuffy and abandoned but for a few old-timers at the far in the front. Garish red lights, all turned a bit too low, lit the space only enough to splash red shadows across everything it touched. She felt grateful for the dimness as it allowed for her immediate escape. Her lungs seemed to clamp shut with embarrassment as she stalked through the bar at full speed, the sensation of Max following her the only thing stopping her from

turning on her heel and bolting right back out of the front door. El bee-lined straight through the main bar and into the back game room stuffed with old arcade consoles. Voices hit her ear when she entered, unaware of her presence against the shadowed. They were voices that she recognized. Ones that made her blush with even more embarrassment. Their presence made her move faster, spurred on by a desperate hope that she would go unnoticed.

She succeeded, or so she thought, and burst through the back door into the black of night.

The darkness and the cool night air hit her like a refreshing splash as she stepped out into the familiar empty field behind the bar. It was a trusty escape; one she had taken endless times throughout the last couple of years when the bar had gotten too hot and loud for her liking. No security lights followed her, allowing her to move with full freedom through the dark. The music from the bar fell to a muffled hum as she trudged through the ankle-high grass in search of her favorite spot: an abandoned Cadillac, ancient and partially rusted out, laid forgotten in the field behind the bar. She suspected it had been Thelma's back in the 80s, left for dead in the back when the engine had died, never to be thought of again.

Pulling her hoodie sleeve over her fist, she wiped the first dots of evening dew from her regular sitting spot on the hood. She toed herself up with help from the metal bumper and let herself fall back against the cold metal. The chill against her back brought her a minute sense of grounding and, as though she was granted some form of miracle, she found herself able to breathe a tiny sigh of relief.

Brain laced with hot anger and unearned embarrassment, she stared up into the sky. The night was dark with no moon in sight, rewarding her with a shockingly clear sky smattered with stars. She lost herself in it instantly as she always did, the space above her so vast and endless that, after a second, her petty protestations and nerves faded away, making space for her true worries that lied beneath.

The challenges that El faced were so much bigger than miscommunications and nosy overbearing friends, she knew. A whisper of that heaviness seeped into her chest. El's breath hitched painfully as a tense prickle bit fresh at her eyes.

God, what she wouldn't have given to live like Max, free and easy and devoid of life altering worries, for just one night.

"Dude! I had NO idea this place existed. This is *awesome!*" Dustin cried as the four men stepped into the back room of the dilapidated bar where Max had demanded they meet them.

Lucas was less impressed. He toed against a dark Dig Dug console. "I don't know, man. These could be money pits. Look how ancient they are."

"Well, we'll know soon enough. I call Ms. PacMan!" Dustin quipped back without missing a beat. He fished through his pockets for a quarter to start the game and crossed toward the second to last console.

Will walked up to a dark Contra console and tested out the buttons in an attempt to make it come alive. He turned back to Mike with a shrug. "How did we end up here, anyway?" he asked.

Mike took a swig of his beer, sighed, and shook his head, "I honestly couldn't tell you. This uh, this wasn't my plan."

Will chuckled. He bent down around the machine to look for the plug in. "Yeah, I gotta say I wasn't expecting an invite out from you tonight. I thought you'd be somewhere else, *with* someone else. Not with your friends."

"Yeah, I attempted that. Somehow..." he grimaced, tossing Dustin a secret glare, "it turned into this."

Will looked up, a knowing look on his face, "Say no more. I get it. Do you think this thing works?"

"I don't know, I – "

At that moment, movement caught the corner of his eye. Someone cut through the side of the room and disappeared out of a hard-to-see door at the back, moving at full speed. Mike blinked in surprise. There was no doubt in his mind who he had seen. He'd paid much too much attention to her in the past couple of weeks not to

recognize the swish of her hair or her stature within a split second. The way she was walking, as though she was trying to escape, sent a sudden chill of worry up his spine.

Max let out an exasperated sigh as she entered just a short moment afterward. Her eyes landed instantly on Mike.

"Is El in here?" she asked, squinting around the shadowed room.

"I think she just went out that door..."

Max's shoulders dropped. She leaned against the the peeling wood paneled wall and sighed. She avoided Mike's eyes as she spoke.

"I'm uh... Look, I'm sorry I threatened your life while we were diving," she grumbled. Finally, she looked up at him. "We're not here because of what I said, are we?"

"No? And... thank you? Is El okay?"

Max huffed and rolled her eyes. "She's pissed at me. Listen, I'm not going to tell you to go after her. I'm not going to tell you *not* to, either. I guess I'm not going to share my opinion at all anymore. Do what you want."

Max pushed herself off the wall and returned to the front before Mike could even attempt to understand what in the hell she had meant. Slowly, his expression the dictionary definition of confusion, he turned back toward the closed door where El had disappeared. Something tugged in his chest. Not a need to be near her. Not that ache or that urge. Rather, a worry. In a split second he found himself moving his feet.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said to Will as he pushed the door open and took a step out. Closing the door quietly behind him, Mike was met by nothing other than pitch black night. The night was gloriously clear. He hadn't seen so many stars in years. Not with the naked eye, at least. The light pollution was so much less near the airfield where the city descended into farmland. It reminded him a bit of home. It would have been absolutely breathtaking if not for the fact that he had something more important on his mind.

Squinting into the dark, he could just barely make out a shadow of El's movements. She disappeared, a slight shadow being swallowed by a larger shadow at the center of what seemed like a field. Mike stepped out into the damp ankle-high grass and made his way carefully to where she had vanished. A streak of silver shined ever so dimly as he neared the source of the darkest shadow. It was just enough for him to make out the presence of a huge old car. His eyes adjusted just enough to spy El's silhouette lying against the hood. He slowed his movements, hoping not to scare her.

"El?"

El shot up with a gasp. Her body rocked the car, it's creaks breaking the silence of the field.

"Mike?!"

Mike jumped back, hands shooting into the air in an invisible surrender. "I am so sorry! I'd hoped you'd heard me coming! I um... I saw you leave the bar. Are you okay?"

"Um," she stuttered, a slight thread of sadness in her tone, "Yeah, I just needed some fresh air. It's really stuffy in there."

"Tell me about it," Mike replied, "I was sweating the second I walked in there."

Great attempt at conversation, Wheeler. Talking about your sweat. Nice.

His voice trailed off, leaving him with nothing but a sudden embarrassment, darkness and her. Crickets trilled in the air, mixing with hints of an old Johnny Cash tune that warbled softly from the bar. Mike bit his lip, desperate for something, anything to fill the void.

"Jupiter is visible tonight," he finally offered.

"Huh? The planet?"

"Yeah, it's visible most of this month."

Another silence stretched out between them. Mike shuffled his feet

against the ground, his trek out to her seeming like an instant mistake.

"I'll just g--"

"H-how can you tell?" she interrupted. Her voice softer, a bit more welcoming. "It all looks the same to me."

"Oh," Mike said in surprise. "Well, I can show you. If you want?"

"Um," El paused, "Okay."

Mike breathed a quick sigh of relief and took a step toward the car. "Can I sit?"

"Sure."

Mike took El's invitation. Finding the old bumper with the soles of his chucks, he slid himself easily up onto the hood of the car beside her. Leaning back onto his hand, he angled toward her and pointed up at the sky.

"You can tell it's a planet because it doesn't twinkle like stars. Can you see it off to the left there? Not far from Sirius?"

"Sirius?"

"The brightest star. It's in Canis Major. Do you see it?"

"Um..." El tilted her head, trying to follow his pointed finger. "Canis Major?"

"Oh! Right. Sorry. I forget that's not always common knowledge. You see the Big Dipper? We can orient from there."

El followed his hand as it shifted to another point in the sky. She was silent for a long moment before she hummed timidly. "Okay... I've *heard* of the Big Dipper, but I – I don't really know what I'm looking for."

Mike's hand fell from the sky.

"Y-you don't know the Big Dipper...?"

Mike was instantly ashamed by his tone, yet... *who didn't know how to find the Big Dipper?*

El was silent for a long moment, her reaction to his callousness lost in the darkness. When she finally spoke, she was desperately quiet. "I wasn't let out... *much*... growing up," she said, her voice possessing a timidity that he had never heard from her before. "I've never really looked at the stars with anyone who could teach me."

Mike froze at the heaviness of her words. The brief mention of her childhood issues from lunch the past Thursday drifted back, mixing with this new information in a way that made his heart break.

He bit back the million rude questions that sprung to his lips.

"Would you like me to show you?" he asked instead. "You showed me your sky today. I can show you mine."

His eyes had finally adjusted to the dark, so he could see the softest hint of her shining eyes as she turned to him, her smile just barely visible, though still somehow highly contagious. "I would love that," she said softly.

The reality he had fallen into dawned on him in an instant. Her closeness, the dark, the blanket of stars. He swallowed hard as he indulged in an instant and secretive smile. Mike didn't know how to tell her that he'd been waiting, hoping, and praying for a moment like this the entire day. He didn't want to dwell on his growing realization about her past, her vague assertions here and there bleeding together to point toward something dark lurking beneath her surface. So instead, he gave her what she'd asked for; what her childhood had somehow missed.

A walk through the stars.

"Okay, so..." Mike said, clearing his throat to focus himself. He stretched his arm over himself, and almost over her, in an effort to point at a spot up and to their left. The position set him so close to her ear that he dropped his voice to a whisper. "Do you see the stars

there that look like a ladle? With the four stars of the bowl and the three stars trailing off for the handle? That's the Big Dipper."

El followed where he pointed. She turned just so, leaning back an imperceptible amount, just enough that her hair fell softly against the side of his cheek. He traced the sky slowly in the shape of a ladle, hoping she'd never find it so he could simply stay in this exact spot as long as possible.

"Oh!" she said with a tiny excitement entering, "Yes, I see it."

"Okay, great! So, if you draw down from there and then cut over a bit to the right, you're going to run into a very bright star." El leaned in closer to his hand, trying to line her eyes up with where his finger traced. She was quiet for a moment, tilting her head this way and that as she sought it out.

"I think I see it," she said ever so quietly.

"And then..." Mike added, sweeping his finger to the right, "Then, you'll get to a bright non-twinkling spot. That's Jupiter."

Worried she might lose the spot, Mike left his finger pointing in the air for a few extra seconds, yet he wasn't looking anymore. His eyes had dropped shut as a wave of unexpected relief crested over him. She didn't seem nearly as angry or upset as she'd seemed storming through the bar just a few minutes earlier, and, judging by the short amount of moments that had gone by, it didn't seem like she had ever been angry or upset with *him* at all. It had been a worry he'd known had no merit, but it had been a worry all the same.

"I see it," she said finally.

"Great," Mike whispered. He dropped his finger from the sky, but he couldn't bring himself to pull away.

They sat there like that within the dark for an indeterminable amount of time, the stars above them seeming as still as everything else in the black night. Mike let his gaze go hazy, the scent of her hair and the rise and fall of her breath heavier on his senses than the sparkling infinity above.

"Thank you," she said softly, breaking a few moments of silence, "And um... thank you for not treating me like I'm stupid. A lot of people aren't this kind when I don't know something obvious."

"Oh, you're *definitely* not stupid," he said easily. "A stupid person wouldn't be able to explain terminal velocity the way you did today."

She turned toward him, so close he could feel her breath catch in the air between them. "You thought that was good?" she asked.

"Really good," He replied with a nod, "Ground school was great. You're a really good teacher. I mean, I can tell someone how all of that works, but you were able to *show* it with just your body. You made it make so much sense in relation to what we were actually doing. It was really cool."

"Thank you," she breathed, her voice almost cooing with gratefulness in a way that made Mike blush against the night.

She leaned deeper back into her hands and let her head fall into the cradle of her shoulders, looking straight up. "Can you tell me some more? About the stars?"

The pattern of stars above her resembled a map for the very first time. Tiny landmarks were scattered here and there, each labeled by Mike. He seemed completely at ease as he rambled on about constellations and planets, black holes and supernovas, pulsars and binary orbits, all in the most adorable way. It was so crazy to think that she had run from the building, hoping that the black of night could hide her away from it all. What she had received was the exact opposite. The dark now felt like a blanket of thick privacy around them both, shrouding El away from the rest of the world so that she could experience Mike, and only Mike.

The only worry she possessed was that the relative silence had made audible her increasingly purring heart.

It was overwhelming, how absolutely Mike had flipped El's mood. She wouldn't have expected it possible, the way he had helped to calm her down, especially after the shame had mixed in. It was a

familiar foe, but one that hurt like hell all the same. Blindspots. Facts that all kids had naturally seemed learned, but had never found their way to her. Her dad had tried to fill in the blanks as best he could, but some things had slipped through the cracks. The stars were one of them. It was a horrible feeling. The last thing she wanted was for Mike to think she was stupid. This *scientist* sitting next to her learning that she, a grown woman, didn't know the stars she suspected were taught to children.

But he hadn't made her feel stupid at all.

Instead, he'd *complimented* her.

If Mike could've seen the smile that had lit up El's face in that moment, she was certain he'd have been able to read her entire heart.

Mike's delightful monologue continued, shifting from the orientation of the night sky to the deeper things beneath that couldn't be seen with the naked eye. She looked away from the sky then. Her eyes had adjusted as best they could to the dark, and as such she could just make out the dim outline of Mike's profile beside her. His eyes were arched toward the stars. A serenity had settled into his expression as he spoke.

El smiled to herself, simply watching the shadow of his lips move.

His words faded off after a moment and he turned to her, catching her staring.

"Am I boring you?" he asked nervously. "I'm sorry, I just really love talking about this stuff. I could go on for days if you don't stop me."

"No!" she exclaimed, "This is great. You study this, right? Or do you just really love this stuff?"

"Oh, good. Thank god. Both," Mike said, his eyes arching back up to the sky, "Astrophysics isn't my focus but I have studied it a lot. Most of the stuff I'm talking about, though, I learned when I was a kid. My sister and I were obsessed." Mike laughed to himself, "Nancy, that's my older sister, she'd gotten really into horoscopes and astrology. I was maybe nine? Anyway, she was convinced that she'd be able to

tell her future if she knew more about the stars, so she got me, being the nerd that I was, to help her with the telescope. We set it up out her window on clear nights and we figured out the constellations together. I guess you could say her trashy obsession with astrology accidentally made me fall in love with astronomy."

"That sounds nice," El mused, the idea of tiny Mike an adorable thought springing through her mind.

"Yeah, I loved it. I still love it, but I *really* loved it back then." Mike arched further back, searching for something that El couldn't discern within the pattern of stars. "That was one of the last things we did together for a long time. She became a teenager and then there was no time for a dorky little brother anymore."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He shrugged it off, "Oh, that's just siblings. Do you have siblings?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, sometimes you're close and sometimes you don't want to have anything to do with each other. That's what siblings are like. At least that's the way it was with Nancy. Holly, my little sister, we've been close since she was born. Holly's a lot younger than me. I'm pretty protective of her. We went through some heavy stuff together after Nancy moved out. We uh -" he paused for a moment, his voice lower than it had been, as though he was lost in thought, " - anyway, Nancy and I were always flipping back and forth between liking each other and hating each other. We're pretty close now. Shit, I'm rambling. Yes, astronomy. I love it. It's awesome. Sorry."

El giggled. "What do you like about it? I mean apart from the fact that this is beautiful?"

Mike considered her question for a moment, his eyes still on the sky. In the silence, a tiny glow began to emanate from his skin.

"The moon's rising," he said. He looked over to her and El froze. With each second, he became a little more visible. Shadow swept away, revealing the lighthearted expression in his eyes, the calm of his

brow, the curve of a soft smile on his lips.

Only then did she truly realize how close they were sitting. He was only a breath away.

"S-sorry," he stuttered, shaking his head in a way that made his puffy hair dance, "I got distracted. What did you ask me?"

El bit her lip to contain her smile, "Um, I think I asked what you love about it?"

"Oh, right," he finally said. He turned back toward the moon then. The growing light caught his pale skin in a way that accentuated the sharp cut of his jaw. "Honestly? Now I love it for a totally different reason. It's like, no matter what happens here; good day or bad day or really the worst day or best day. All of that up there?" he said, pointing vaguely at the sky, "That just keeps going. For millennia. We can't control it. Honestly, *it* controls *us*. We're just tiny infinitesimal parts of all of that. When I get really really anxious that thought can sometimes calm me down." He smiled to himself and shook his head. "I mean, *sometimes* it can be calming," he corrected himself, "Other times it scares the shit out of me. The vastness of it all. It can also be completely terrifying. But maybe that's just me. I'm afraid of everything."

"You don't seem like you're afraid of everything," she said, the words slipping easily from her lips.

"Me?" he asked, pointing to himself. He sighed. "I'm terrified all the time. *All* the time. So much so it's embarrassing."

"Really?" she asked, "You don't seem like that."

Mike turned to her then. Confusion laced through his features as he seemed to study her. His voice was hesitant when he finally spoke, "I don't?"

"No," she shook her head and smiled at him softly, "You're *impulsive*. Plus, I know what fear looks like. My job is basically helping people face fear. A person that's terrified *all the time* wouldn't choose to surrender to an scary experience, enjoy it, and then come back more.

But you did."

"They wouldn't?" he asked.

"No," she replied with a hint of surprise. "There's a difference between being afraid of something and having your life owned by fear. Sure, you're afraid of stuff, but don't you seem like your life is owned by fear."

"That's because you calm me."

"What?"

Mike's eyes widened in surprise as his own words. He looked away from her and was quiet for a moment. He bit his lip and took a deep breath, his voice thick with admission. "I don't seem that way around you because I feel calm around you."

"What does that mean?"

"I *am* kind of terrified all of the time," he said with a helpless shrug, "Well, I have been for the past few years, at least. I have this scared voice that's always bouncing around in my head. It drives me crazy. But it uh, it goes quiet when you're around."

"It does?" she asked, her words tentative, her heart picking up speed.

"Yeah," Mike smiled to himself as he continued, almost as though he was embarrassed, "It's just when I'm around you everything feels... I don't know. You have this way of making everything feel exciting, and like no matter what's going on its going to turn out just fine. That probably sounds really weird and I'm probably saying way too much right now... but I feel like myself when I'm around you, or who I *used* to be, for the first time in a long time."

"Maybe that is who you are," she offered softly, "but you just forgot?"

"Or maybe you're just amazing."

Mike's gaze drifted up to hers in an instant, deeper than the night sky above, wide and locked upon hers with nothing left to hide. His words burned away the oxygen in the thin sliver of air between them,

making it hard for her to breathe.

"Can I kiss you, El?" he asked gently, his request tickling her lips.

"Yes."

He moved slowly, his breath staggered in its mingling with hers, so close, so painfully close that she felt she might burst. El's eyes dropped shut and her heart leapt as she searched for him in that final fleeting space. Tenderly, he found her. His kiss was earnest yet slow. His hand reached her, gliding across her jaw with a delicacy so light, as though he thought she might break.

Which, little did he know, she was extremely close to doing.

That spark. That undeniable instant spark. It shot through her in a rush of pure raw electricity at the touch of his lips. It felt so jaw-droppingly fantastic that she almost didn't care what she might ruin next. Aided only by the quick warning of his request, she found the strength within herself to contain the surge for the very first time. Restraining it like something wild on a leash, El sighed deeper into his lips. Her hand found its way to steady herself, her fingers wrapping around his wrist as he weaved into her hair at the nape of her neck.

It was one thing to control herself within anger or fear. It was another thing entirely to control herself within bliss.

That's what kissing Mike was proving to be.

Bliss.

Utterly perfect unraveling bliss.

She was soft in every sense of the word. Soft lips and soft skin and soft sounds. Soft in the way she shifted and pulled herself closer to him. Soft in the way her cold fingers weaved between his.

Soft on his heart in a way that he could hardly contain.

Kissing El Hopper was nothing like the first time. Unlike then, Mike

wasn't kissing a beautiful stranger in a highly ill-advised sense of thanks. No. In this quiet moment, beneath a brilliant blanket of stars, Mike was kissing *El*. Radiant, vulnerable, kind, amazing *El*. A woman who had just, with only a few words, had made him question everything he thought he knew about himself. A woman so astounding and alive that he felt electricity shoot through him as though she were emitting it herself.

The entire universe could have frozen above them and he never would have known. For in that moment the only thing that felt real was her.

Mike gave into it all then. His need for her made itself known as he shifted, his arm wrapping around her back and leading her slowly down. She followed him willingly until her back met the cold metal. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him close, his chest falling against hers with a sense of closeness that made him ache for more. Yet, her lips slowed, growing sweet in small pecks, her fingers tracing his shoulder, passing through his hair and finally rest upon his jaw. He pulled away just an infinitesimal amount, daring to open his eyes for assurance that this was, in fact, not a dream.

If it was a dream, it was a good one. El's smile beamed softly in the light of the moon.

Mike, simply starstruck, could no longer control his honesty. "I've wanted to kiss you again since the second I stopped last time," he whispered, his fingers knotting into her hair.

El emitted the sweetest breathy laugh. Her eyes closed as her smile grew. "You asked this time," she mused.

"Ugh," Mike's forehead dropped against hers, his face flushing in an instant. "I should have asked last time. I'm still so sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I – I wasn't thinking."

"You're forgiven," she whispered with a light giggle, her fingers still grazing lightly against his jaw. "I do like it when you ask, though."

Mike looked up, catching her eye, "Yeah?"

She nodded, a hint of mischief filling her gaze. "Mmm. I like saying yes to you."

Mike's breath caught.

"Can you kiss me again?"

"Yes."

Hot chills traced down Mike's body as El's fingers climbed into his hair, pulling him into her in a way that rendered him completely helpless. Her lips were still wet from his as though they had never parted at all. In an instant rise of heat, they collapsed deeper into each other, the hood of the car creaking from strain beneath them in a way that made El laugh against his kiss. Her hands twisted tight around the back of his neck pulling herself tighter against him as she sought to deepen the kiss. Her tongue danced across his lips in a way that woke up his senses with an intensity that overwhelmed him.

She made him feel *wanted*.

It was hard to believe.

This woman? *This perfect* woman? Pulling him into her in the moonlight, her fingernails running tracks through his hair?

How?

"You're incredible..." Mike hummed involuntarily as his lips left hers, aching to explore other avenues that she contained. He traveled her jaw line, ending at her ear, her hand tightening into his hair at the contact. He couldn't help but find himself smiling into her skin. His kisses grew hotter, goaded on by her increasingly staggered breath. He traced the length down her neck until he stopped in the crook of her collarbone, lips pressing in such a way that she gasped and her whole body flinched –

"Mike!"

It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

...Yet it was the last thing heard before the music drifting from the

bar screeched to a halt and a loud and bizarre static replaced it in the air, punctuated with screams.

Mike pulled away in an instant and looked up toward the building. The static was so loud that it sounded like it could be emanating from directly over him. Yet, as quickly as it started, it stopped, disappearing into the night as though it had never existed at all.

Something else, or rather, *someone* else, had disappeared as well.

El had leaped from the car without warning. Her feet hit the ground hard as she trampled toward the building through the tall grass. Mike, lips bruised and senses shocked, shot from where they'd laid and was quickly on her heels, his long legs making quick work to fill the gap between them. She threw the door open and he sped up, catching it directly before it closed, easing himself inside.

Commotion met him the second he answered the door.

Lucas stood amidst a cloud of smoke, his mouth and nose covered with his t-shirt, a fire extinguisher in his hand. "- Thank God I saw it when we were walking in!"

"Well, son," croaked an ancient lady who Mike could only guess was Thelma, "I'm not sure this place would still be standing if you hadn't acted so fast. Next round of drinks is on me."

"But that doesn't explain how this happened?!" Dustin cried, his hands waving dramatically in the air. He looked up and saw Mike, his eyes going wide, "Mike! Where the hell have you been?! You missed the *craziest* thing. The lights flashed and then the radio cut out and then Contra literally *caught fire*!"

"We heard it outside and came running," Mike said, slightly out of breath, "It just burst into flames?"

Dustin sputtered a cough, his eyes wide, "I don't know! It was so weird! The lights freaked out and the music screeched - "

" - it was *really* weird," Will confirmed, "But everyone's okay and Lucas put it out instantly. Contra is toast, though."

Mike bent down and took a look at the machine, but he backed quickly away. It was still puffing out tendrils clouds of black smoke.

"Lucas, stay with the machine until the smoke is out," Mike directed, "Everyone else needs to get out. We shouldn't be breathing this air."

Mike turned around to find El against the wall. Her eyes were wide and glassy. Blood had pooled in a tiny puddle under her nose. "El? Your nose is bleeding again. Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said quietly, looking down at her feet as she rubbed her forehead. "Just... a migraine is starting. It's..." she cringed. "It happens with the nose bleeds."

"Here, um..." Mike gently took her forearm and led her from the back room into the main bar where cleaner air prevailed. He stopped at an empty table and tugged a few napkins from the dispenser, handing them to her.

She took the napkins hesitantly, her eyes skittish as she dabbed at her nose. "Thank you," she murmured.

While in the back of Mike's head he knew that the flip of El's mood was extremely odd, in that moment all he could seem to care about was her safety.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked. "Do you need water? Pain killers?"

El sighed, looking up at him for the first time. "No, I - I should go home, though. Before the uh... before the migraine gets worse."

"Are you sure you'll be okay to drive?" Mike asked carefully.

"Oh, yeah. Yes," she said, waving off his worry. "I'll be fine. It's quick drive home."

"Can I walk you to your car at least?"

Mike's brow was knitted in the truest expression of worry as he fussed over her. El smiled despite herself at his offer to walk her to her car.

She nodded.

It was painfully sweet, the attention he trained on her. Mike stepped forward lead her out of the bar. He shouldered the door open and made space for her to pass. They left the old doors behind and made their way into the moonlit parking lot.

"This is me," she said as she stopped near her car.

Heart full of a thousand warring emotions, she dug in her purse for her keys, but Mike's hand stopped her, dropping upon her forearm.

"Hey, I uh... I had a great night with you, El. An amazing night, really," Mike said with such sincerity that it made her avoidance impossible. Her eyes trained up to his and she was trapped. The moonlight cut straight through his darkened gaze, almost shining a light to its unreachable depths.

"I did too," El said, trying to hide the sadness from her voice.

Mike hesitated for a moment. His eyebrows pulled tight in an instant and off he went. "Can I – um – Can I see you this week? You know, not as a student and not as an accident and not with everyone we know inviting themselves along?"

"Is that what happened tonight?" she asked quickly, desperately hoping he'd ever so casually handed her the answer. "I couldn't tell."

"Ugh, yes," he groaned, rolling his eyes. "That was *not* my plan. Anyway, I just - I'd really like to take you out. Like, premeditated. Planned. *Alone*."

"Like a date?" El asked lamely, hopefully, treacherously.

"Oh, is that what that's called?" Mike teased with a self deprecating laugh. "Yeah, like a date. Actually, not *like* a date. An actual date. Can I take you on a date? Wow, I've said date a lot in the last ten seconds I'm going to stop talking now and let you answer me, sorry."

It was a quick calculation.

The lamps at her house, destroyed.

The electronics in the bar, destroyed.

His absolutely adorable presence, the culprit.

The answer was gut wrenchingly clear. It was practically written on the moon as it shined down upon them.

"Yes," she said quietly, defying the obvious with a rebellious rush. She smiled, "I'd love that."

"Great," he replied, almost laughing at himself in relief. "What night is good for you?"

Her heart screamed '*Right now?!*' Her brain screamed '*Never! Stop this now, you stupid idiot!*'.

And so, with a quick tabulation, she said...

"Thursday?"

"Thursday's good!" Mike said with an instant and excitable nod. "Yeah, that's good. Great. Awesome. Thursday, then," He rocked on the balls of his feet and bit his lip to contain a precious smile. He was quiet for a moment, his eyes off toward the grove of trees.

El's anxiety bubbled in her gut. It was an odd concoction, yet one she was growing bizarrely used to. A dizzying mix of satisfaction, yearning, and massive guilt. Selfishness and consequence. Worst case scenarios and best case scenarios all rolled into one. Bravery. Stupid reckless bravery. Leaving her confused, hardly knowing which way was up.

She was playing with fire without a guidebook. Dark on a brand new journey.

There was one thing she did know for sure, though.

She knew what she wanted, without a doubt -

"El?"

He looked back at her.

- Him.

She didn't say anything. Instead, her toes raised almost of their own accord. Mike didn't even flinch. He moved like he'd been fighting restraints that had finally been released. Hand skirting against her jaw, he leaned down to meet her lips once again. She arched up into him, her focus hell bent on controlling the raging sensation within her. Yet, she needn't have worried. His lips moved softly against her, his hand brushing against her cheek with a caring that stole her breath away almost *more* than the hottest possible kiss.

Mike pulled away after a short moment, his breath warm against her lips.

"Will you um, will you text me when you get home?" he asked, his hand still on her cheek, his voice the simplest of whispers. "It's late and you have a headache and I, um, I know you're an adult who can clearly take care of themselves but I uh, I tend to worry."

"Yes," she breathed, her chest blooming with an instant warmth. "I'll let you know."

"Thanks. I hope that's not weird."

"It's not," she said, failing to contain her smile. "I promise."

Her fingers fumbled against her keys, failing to unlock her car. Finally, on the third try, her finger found the tiny button and a quick beep echoed from her car, knocking them each a tiny bit back to reality.

Mike took a step back and shoved his hands into his pockets. With cheeks that even in the moonlight looked flushed, he smiled. "Goodnight, El."

She fought back a giggle, "Goodnight, Mike."

El wasn't sure how she had managed to get into her car and drive away, yet somehow she'd found herself on the dark road, giggling like a child breaking rules.

She had *no* idea what she was going to do. At this rate she was going

to blow up the entire planet if he touched her in the wrong (right?) way.

Shit, she really needed to make this up to Thelma...

El caught her reflection in the mirror at a red light. Bruised puffy lips greeted her, complete with flushed cheeks, knotted hair, and a painfully ridiculous smile. It gave her heart. For, there was a truth written in her dishevelment. She had gotten pretty damned far this time before she had fucked something up. In fact, every time she'd been around him she had been able control herself significantly better than the time before. Trip ups were becoming easier to avoid. A combo of staying sober and keeping her wits about her was hopefully all she needed. That, and maybe a little more exposure therapy, of course.

Then and there, as El drove back into the city, her eyes almost crossed and still seeing stars, she made a promise to herself. She could definitely, absolutely, figure this out. She *had* to figure this out. She *would* figure this out.

Because there was *no way in hell* that she was going to be able to talk herself out of Mike Wheeler now.

Mike watched the empty road in something akin to a trance long after El's tail lights had disappeared from view, his lips tingling almost as much as his heart. He walked slowly back across the parking lot toward the bar, his feet toeing against the loose gravel like a boy caught in a daydream. The smile on his face was becoming painful, pulling against muscles that usually didn't get used with such intensity.

Yet an interruption was imminent, and it came in the form of a red-headed blur running out of the door.

"Did El leave?" she called as she spotted Mike in the parking lot.

"Yeah," Mike said, trying to keep a straight face. "She just went home."

Max sighed. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she said she was getting a migraine."

"Oh, was her nose bleeding?"

"Yeah."

"Figures, okay. That makes sense."

"Does her nose bleed a lot?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Um, yeah," Max said with a shrug, walking closer to Mike. "Sometimes. Usually only after diving. Sometimes when she gets overwhelmed. She'll be fine. She always is. Did she's uh..." Max cringed, "Did she mention if she was still mad at me?"

"Um," Mike bit his lip that felt raw from El's kiss, "I can't say we talked about it."

"Oh!" Max replied with an instantly knowing look. "Say no more. I'll call her tomorrow. She *was* my ride though."

"We can give you a lift!" Lucas said as he came up behind her, lacing his arms around her waist. "It's still early. Want to come back to our place?"

"Ooh," Max cooed, turning in his arms, Mike quickly forgotten, "Does that mean I get to spend more time with the hero of the evening?"

Mike grimaced at the instant canoodling going on beside him and looked away toward Dustin who was coming up to join them. Dustin dug in his pants pocket and tossed his keys toward Mike's chest. "You ready to get us all home safe?"

Mike would have thought that nothing, *absolutely nothing*, could have plucked him from the cloud he was floating on. Yet, the keys that had crashed into his chest did the trick, dragging him like a deadweight back down to earth. He tossed them back to Dustin with such instant revulsion that Dustin almost missed the catch.

"Ignore him, Mike. I stayed sober. Don't worry about it," Will said, coming up behind Dustin. "Dustin, I'll bring you back in the morning to get your car."

"Fair," Dustin conceded, "but we're going on driving lessons this week, Mikey! That was the deal."

Mike's stomach crashed. That had been the deal... Yet, he couldn't lose himself in that terrifying truth in full because, at that perfect moment, his phone buzzed. Following his friends to the car, he fished his phone from his pocket.

"Home safe!" was all it said.

Mike bit his lip in a failed attempt to quell his smile, all focus suddenly on his screen. His fingers itched to tell her everything. They itched to tell her how beautiful she was, how he could still taste her on his lips, how he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her for weeks.

Instead, his fingers shook as he typed only, *"Sweet dreams, El. Thursday :)"*

"Thursday :)" was all he received back. An instant reply.

It was all Mike needed to render his momentary panic instantly forgotten.

Hi lovelies! I sure hope you enjoyed this installment! Let me know what you're thinking here or on Tumblr ([dancingskygreen](#)) or on insta ([el_borealis](#)).

6. Chapter 6

El sat on the rim of the tub in the grey light of morning, fresh off a sleepless night. She dropped her head upon her knees.

In the buzz of the muggy night air, with her skipping heart and her bruised lips, it had all seemed so simple! Yet, as it always did, morning held a different story. Her heart still screamed all the same, its punch drunk longing ringing like a bell. Yet, it could not provide anything more than a begging desire.

It could not provide single safe path forward at all.

Safe... her heart almost begged her to abandon the concept! A shocking sensation, for 'safety' was something that it had taken her years to attain.

El had been through hell to create safety in her life. Years of it, each a little harder than the last. She had struggled through the cold walls of a sterile hell, 'safety' then a word that she could not even comprehend. Upon her escape, the man who had saved her used the word, foreign and confusing to her ear, as he explained their need for her to hide. Even in the years that followed the closure of the lab, once safety was a concept that she could possibly attain, her own fears stood in her way. El suffered through failed attempt after failed attempt to free herself from her paranoia, always checking over her shoulder for that one familiar face that could take it all away. It had kept her in that cabin years longer than she had wanted. Yet she had fought through, breaking down her Agoraphobia and Claustrophobia in ways that felt like sheer terror in the moment until she she had finally come out on the other side.

A sense of safety had been her prize.

El had long since become content with a life that she could predict. There was a unique serenity within the consistency of something that felt sane. She liked it. The quiet ease. The day to day. It allowed her to relax. To breathe. It allowed her to live something akin to the 'normal' that she had longed for for so long.

The outside world didn't see this, of course. They only saw the 'daredevil' and the 'adrenaline junky'. The girl suiting up again and again just to fly up and fall back down. They did not understand that the very sky itself, with its nonexistent walls and its lack of prying eyes, felt like the safest place that she had ever been.

Sure, there was more that El wanted. A little more adventure, a little more spark, that sense of something sweeping her off her feet like she'd always seen in the movies. Yet, she had shied away from those things at every turn, too terrified to rock the boat upon the calmest waters that her life had ever achieved.

Well... at least that had been true up until two weeks ago...

Until Mike Wheeler had appeared.

Like the flip of a switch, El Hopper no longer found herself to be calculating safety with any intelligence at all. Instead she found herself increasingly feeling like a rebel, her hand upon a burning stovetop, refusing to pull away.

El took a deep breath, but it hitched at the tightness of her chest, making her laugh and sigh at the same time.

El knew fear. She knew it well. She knew it had a place. And she knew that she should have feared Mike with everything she had.

She should have feared him like she feared deep water or harsh cold lights. She should have feared him like she feared thunderstorms, his touch lighting up her upin the same way as a lightning strike, the electricity coursing through the air and seeping into her skin, combining with her own power in a way that clouded her nerves the little shocks of sharp pain, leaving her weakened and ill.

Even more than that, she should have feared the aftermath of Mike's touch like she had feared other aftermaths in her life. The aftermath of the rescued plane crash, or the rescued car wreck, or the rescued baby carriage. The aftermath of any time in which she had publicly exhibited her powers. It was exactly the same! After each of those events El had spent months within spirals of paranoic fear, convinced that someone somewhere had seen the signs. Convinced that eyes

were prying, working to unravel her secret...

Yet, despite it all, her skin did nothing but sing at the fading sensation of Mike's embrace... his breath on her neck... the stars in his eyes still glimmering in her mind like a night dive, a careen so pure that she didn't know which way was up...

Mike Wheeler was dangerous in a way that El Hopper had never experienced in her life.

He was dangerous in a way that didn't feel dangerous at all.

El let out a dark laugh, the tv trope of the 'bad boy' lilting through her mind. It was hilarious how much Mike did not fit that description. With his kind eyes and his soft skin. With the endless intelligence and self deprecation and acceptance that he laid at her feet, making her soften at his side with an ease that she had so very rarely felt.

Yet he was dangerous. Or, more correctly, he made her dangerous. And, well... that might have been her biggest fear of all.

The caustic smoke from the game console at Thelma's seemed to fill her bathroom with its presence at the thought, seeping from her fresh memory in a way that made her feel like she might choke on it for real. She had utterly obliterated Thelma's bar. She had put her friends in danger. She had put her cover in danger. She had put him in danger. She -

Her thought was knocked from her mind as her doorbell rang in the early morning light. El almost slipped from where she sat on the edge of the bathtub, skittering up with a fresh wave of paranoia.

No one showed up at her house at 7:30am on a Sunday morning.

Breath tight in her chest, El tiptoed into the main room, avoiding the sightline of the windows as she snuck closer to the door.

"I know you're here! Your car is parked out front!"

El's chest released from its instinctual tightness as Max's voice drifted through the door. Heart leaping in a way that made her gasp, El

almost ran to the door, flinging it open with desperation.

"Oh, thank god," El cried, her voice manic. She tugged Max's arm before Max could even register what the hell was going on, making her stumble over the threshold into the house. El slammed the door behind them and pulled Max into an instant embrace. "I'm so sorry I yelled at you," El said, burying her face into Max's smokey smelling hair. "Are you okay?"

"Whoa whoa! It's okay! I'm fine!" Max cried with a laugh, her arms, full of coffee cups and a bag, flailing a bit at El's sides from her trapped stance. "Are we not fighting anymore? Because I had the whole big apology planned. I brought apology breakfast and everything. I'm fine. Are you okay? You're acting weird."

"I- I haven't slept, I - "

El pulled away, looking her best friend in the eye. Surprise flashed in Max's expression, her blue eyes darting between each of El's with worry.

In that moment a surge so strong and so dangerous shot through El's body. A begging request to let it all out. All twenty-five years. It would be so easy to just let it slip...

But it was selfish and damning and would only put Max in more danger than El had already laid at her feet...

Her lips slammed like a steel trap against it all. Biting her lip hard, El struggled to find words to replace the ones that she so desperately wanted to say.

"Last night... It was - " El sighed, "It was crazy and good and bad and - and I just - I - "

"Hey..." Max said softly as she finally found a way to jostle the coffee cups in order to give El a hug back. She pulled El in in a comforting manner, "Everything's okay. Thelma's okay and Lucas put out the fire and Mike looked... well Mike looked more than okay. Way more than okay. And I'm sorry I butted into your shit. I shouldn't have done that. Everything's okay. Really."

"Okay," El breathed, her friend's embrace and naive words delivering a sense of grounding that made up for some of her lost sleep. Max pulled away after a moment and led the way into El's living room. El followed, not releasing her hold on her friend. They both collapsed onto the couch, Max mostly due to the fact that she didn't have a choice.

"Here. Coffee. Drink," Max said, shoving a cup into El's hands. "I added three extra sugar packets just like you like, you monster."

"Thank you," El replied, gratefulness growing like a bloom in her chest. She smiled shakily, her voice almost a pout. "I'm glad you're here."

Max snickered, "I can tell. Now, care to tell me what the hell has you acting like the world's burning down? Because from what I gathered last night, you should be feeling very different."

"What do you mean?"

Max gave her a knowing look, "Oh, just that Mike seemed pretty unable to talk after you left last night. His face was like completely frozen in a smile for the entire hour that I was around him. What the hell did you do to him?"

El shut her eyes, her quirked lips once again trying to betray her raging anxiety. Her voice was quiet when she answered. "I made out with him on the hood of that old car in the back."

Max squealed, "El Hopper, you dog! Was it good? Was it great? Was it everything?"

El cringed, peering carefully through the fringe of her eyelashes, "I..."

Max clearly had no interest in a coy reply, "El Hopper, you were mean to me last night! That means you have to pay. I will happily take payment in details, so spill!"

El sighed, "It was...Yes, it was good... too good?"

Max's eyebrow rose curiously, "What the hell does too good mean?"

El seethed, the answer searing on her tongue, completely unable to voice.

"I'm... scared." she managed.

"Scared of what?"

"Um..." El took a breath, "I've... never done this before?"

It wasn't a lie...

"What part? Liked a guy like this?"

El nodded, the words more true than Max could have ever known.

Max's expression turned sympathetic, her smile almost amused. She leaned back into the couch cushion, turning toward El directly, "Sweetie, listen. Are you worried that you're falling for him? Because that's obvious and I really think you're safe there. That guy seems like he's been knocked over the head for you. And if you're worried about the other, you know, the other stuff? Well... that makes sense. You don't..." Max bit her lip, hesitant, "You don't have a lot of experience."

Good analogy. Really good analogy. El jumped at it.

"So... yes. ok!" El almost yelped, "Right. I don't have a lot of - experience at - this. I - I don't - Max, I don't know what I'm doing. I feel like a mess. My brain is all scrambled and it's overwhelming and I'm worried I could hurt him - "

" - hurt him? Like his feelings? - "

" - No. I mean... yes? His feelings! Yes?" El corrected, almost gasping at the catch, her words getting ahead of her. She tried to force a breath. "I guess I... I don't know how to... act around him? I don't want to mess... anything up."

"Sorry... I'm not following. Are you trying to tell me that you're afraid you're falling for him too fast?" Max asked, looking at her with a bewildered look. "Is that it?"

El couldn't blame her for her confusion.

"Um..." El wilted a bit, her hope fading that she could possibly communicate anything close to what she truly meant.

It was then, though, that Max burst into an instant and blinding smile. She dropped her head back into the cushion in the most gossipy way. "Oh my god, look at you! You're so cute!"

Blowing up multiple things due to the first hint of hickey was not what El would characterize as 'cute', but there wasn't much that she could say about it.

"Ellie," Max said reassuringly, "If you're so worried about all of this then you should just take it slow."

The words, so obvious, so clear, hit El like a dull smack to the chest.

"What do you mean... slow?"

"What do you mean what do I mean?" Max replied, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Don't rush into anything if you're not comfortable. I mean, it's not my move, obviously, but you can take all the time you want if that's what's bothering you. It's VERY obvious that Mike is interested. I bet if you just told him you that want to take this slow he'd get right on board. I mean, don't take this wrong the wrong way but he doesn't really seem like he has too much experience either. You could probably keep things entirely PG and he'd be cool with it."

El stared at Max in a bit of a daze, her advice so simple and obvious that it kind of dumbed El's senses with its obviousness. El went through the rolodex in her mind, each anxiety tossing itself up for scrutiny to the idea.

...Taking a step back. Being near him but not as much as she'd desperately wanted. Constraining. Controlled...

"Slow. PG. Yes. That might work..." El whispered to herself. She looked back at Max, wide eyed, "Should I... talk to him? About - would that be weird?"

Max snorted, "I mean, talk to him if you want to. From how he acts around you I'm pretty sure he'd say yes if you told him that you're saving yourself for marriage, or that you want to be courted and that you want your entire first year of dates to be supervised by your dad. Have you seen how he looks at you? You don't have anything to worry about."

Max fell quiet beside her, watching her as she drank her coffee. El thought through the idea once again. It tickled like a feather against the steel trap that had seized her heart through the night. In reply, her chest softened, dealing her a slightly better breath than she'd been able to take all morning.

"So... are you please going to tell me what happened?" Max asked after a moment, her voice edging with giddy impatience. "Or am I going to have to torture it out of you?"

El's expression cracked into an involuntary smile, her senses a little lighter, her heart thudding with a tiny ray of relief.

"I uh..." she hid her face in the cushion, her voice muffling as she continued. "It was wonderful."

"Details, Hopper," Max chided, digging her finger into El's side. "Feed me details."

El's eyes shined as she opened them, "We looked at the stars all night. He taught me about space stuff and then he told me I was amazing and he's uh... yeah. It was... it was perfect."

"Awww!" Max cooed, ruffling El's hair, "What a perfectly nerdy way to seduce you!"

"Max!"

"Did he finally ask you out?"

"I'm seeing him Thursday if that answers your question," El replied, a blush hinting upon her pale cheeks. "And it turns out he was trying to ask me out yesterday but you and Dustin had to go and ruin that."

"Doesn't seem like we ruined anything at all," Max said with a wink,

"Well, except Thelma's. I think we ruined Thelma's. At least Contra. Ugh, that was my favorite console. I'm pissed. How crazy was that explosion, by the way!?"

At that, El's mood screeched to a halt.

She averted her eyes. "I... didn't really see it."

"It was insane!" Max cried, gabbing about it like it was just another event and not the growing source of El's tremors throughout the night. "I've never seen anything like it. The lights got really bright and then they were flashing and the music screeched to static and the consoles all just went white and glowed really bright for a split second. Then it all stopped at once and that one console just 'BOOM!' burst into flames."

It was a unique type of torture, hearing the play-by-play, every sensation of the destruction still memorable within El's veins. She winced, attempting with so much discomfort to feign casual interest. "Is everything okay, though? With Thelma? And the building?"

"Yeah, I think so," Max said with a shrug, "Lucas put it out right away, thank God. What a nerd. He checked where the fire extinguisher was when we arrived? Who does that? Especially, what kind of guy that I would date does that? Anyway, Thelma was a little shaken up. I think she's going to close off the back room."

"Shit," El griped. "I should go check on her. I feel bad."

Max snorted softly, "Oh Ellie, you saint. You didn't even do anything. You weren't even there. You were outside getting felt up on the car."

"I wasn't getting felt up! Jesus," El retorted. "We were just making out."

"Awww that is so adorably high school."

"You're enjoying this way too much."

"Damn straight I am!" Max cried, reaching forward to unpack her breakfast sandwich. "I've been waiting years for your sweet dorky butt to fall head over heels for somebody. I'm not going to waste it

now. Unless, of course, you're not ready to get felt up. In that case I will support your boundaries and not joke about it."

"Well... I'm not ready," El lightheartedly bit back, "I'm... yeah... I'm going to take it slow. It's good advice. Thank you. But yeah, I'm worried about Thelma. I'll check on her after work today. Which, hey. We're probably late. I still need to get ready."

"No need, didn't you get the text from admin?" Max replied, her mouth half full of sausage biscuit. "It's going to storm all day. Flights are cancelled. It's supposed to rain every day until Wednesday. Sucks. Damn Mother Nature ruining my paycheck."

El cringed, just the simple concept of a stormy week giving her a headache. "I missed the text. Until Wednesday? Ugh, that makes me lose the whole week. I won't even be in on Wednesday."

"What's Wednesday?"

El leaned forward and picked up the sandwich that Max brought her. "I have to help my dad throw a retirement lunch for his dispatcher back at home. You think it'll be clear by Thursday?"

"Why?" Max asked with a gleam in her eye, "So you can work or so it's nice and clear for your date?"

El, cheeks now stained permanently pink, averted her eyes. "Both." She took a bite of her sandwich and turned back to Max, eyes wide. "So wait... if there's no work, did you just come here to bring me breakfast?"

"Apology breakfast," Max corrected, knocking her sandwich into El's in a bit of a toast. "Plus, I needed Lucas to give me a ride somewhere and this felt better than home."

El almost choked on her sandwich. "You stayed with Lucas last night?"

"Well," Max shot El a look, "My ride ditched me at Thelma's so..."

"Ugh, I'm sorry..."

"I'm kidding! I probably would've gone home with him anyway," she said with a wink, "We cuddled all night. It was... nice."

"Sounds like you're taking it slow, too."

"Oh no," Max said with an amused shake of her head. "That was after."

"...Oh!"

"But, you know, the cuddling was still nice," Max dropped her head back into the cushion with the slightest bit of abandon. "He's a major dork and he's very opinionated but he's hot and he's.... nice?"

"Nice guys are good! I've been telling you that for years!" El cried, bumping her shoulder into Max's.

"And I didn't listen but..." Max shrugged, ducking her head. "You might be onto something."

The normalcy of the moment brought a sense of relief that seemed to clear the fog from El's eyes and, bit by bit, she felt her hot-wired brain relax. There was work to be done. There were messes to be cleaned up and there were things to be taken slow. However, with Max at her side and some sense spoken into the air, El had to accept that at least for now everyone and everything, her secret included, was still safe.

"So, you're sure that the lights lit up really really bright for a second before they started flashing and the music went to static?"

"Yeah."

Brow furrowed, Mike turned on his heel and paced back in the other direction upon the kitchen floor, "That first part is exactly what happened on El's porch. The lights shot so bright that they burst."

"So, what are you saying?" Will asked.

"I don't know what I'm saying yet. I need to think about it more," Mike said, "What if we've stumbled on like some really bad issue with

the electrical grid? I've never heard of anything like this before, but think about it. It's the only working hypothesis I can think of. Both were some kind of power surge."

"I guess you do have a point," Will replied, scrolling his phone, only half listening.

"I'm convinced!" Dustin declared as he entered the kitchen, "We're witnessing a government conspiracy. You solved it, Mike. Now, time to go."

Mike groaned.

His mind was spinning in a million different directions that morning, all fighting to arrest his emotions. At least for now, the mystery of the explosions felt like the safest place to reside. If he were to admit it, though, he'd had hopes to spin Dustin up inside of it. Dustin had always been the friend who was most interested in Mike's endless curiosity. And he had good reason to want to distract him... Yet, as Dustin walked to the wall and grabbed his car keys from the hook, Mike realized with a lurch in his chest that his attempt had not been successful.

"You ready?" Dustin asked, holding out the keys.

A sharp pang of nervousness threaded through Mike's limbs. His eyes narrowed on the metal in Dustin's hand.

"We don't have a lot of time. It's going to rain in a couple of hours," Dustin reminded him, edging toward the door.

"Maybe we should wait, then," Will chimed in, glancing to Mike with a hint of worry.

"Listen, we can start in an empty parking lot. We'll go to the school. It'll be easy!" Dustin offered.

"Dustin, we don't have to make him do this," Will said, before he turned to Mike. "You don't have to do this."

His friends bickered the slightest bit as Mike stood there, very still. He felt so stupid. Even after so many years, after the countless signs

that things had gotten better, he still felt the same old sensation wash over him.

Heavy. Unreal.

Yet, he reminded himself, this was part of the bargain. Part of the plan. The agreement that he had so rashly made. It was the expected trade off for Dustin's favor that had led to Mike to an absolutely perfect night.

El...

Like a bubble, something soft rose within his mind.

Mike stepped forward and swallowed through a thick lump in his throat. "No, I promised," he said, "Starting in a parking lot would be good."

He chose not to look at the surprise on either of his friends' faces as he reached for his shoes and tugged them on, leading the way out of the door. His heart was racing was the climbed in the passenger seat of Dustin's car, dread pooling in his gut.

Yet, he forced himself to think, El had been right. However much she knew it or not. This wasn't him. This was the ghost of something that he was finally ready to try to let go.

It was oddly easy to block out the drive to the campus parking lot once his brain was on that track. The grey morning air blanketed the world out the window, but his thoughts were twelve hours in the past...

The sweetness of El's kiss goodbye had almost beat the one that they had shared on the car. Her toes had risen her height with an expectation that he could help but match. It had ached to say goodbye to her so quickly. In the frenzy of everything he had even almost stupidly offered to drive her home, thanks to the shocking amount of worry he'd had for her burgeoning migraine and nosebleed.

Maybe he could someday...

He was already counting down the moments until he saw her again, itching to text her though he knew it might be too soon. There was just something about her that consumed him, flipping his consciousness sideways and dislodging his old crutches in the process. She -

"We're here."

Mike looked up, shocked back to reality. The massive empty parking lot behind the building where he taught labs laid out before him, expectant and waiting.

He gulped. "Well, I jumped out of a plane twice yesterday... I should be able to handle an empty parking lot."

"That's the spirit!" Dustin cried, patting Mike encouragingly on the shoulder before he put the car in park.

Long legs out the door, Mike stood up. He took a deep breath as he crossed around the car and crawled into a space where he hadn't sat in just over three years. Hardly fitting, he adjusted with a grunt, trying to ignore the sensation of his hands shaking all the while.

"Oh man, I forgot you were going to mess up my alignment," Dustin joked as he watched Mike push the seat all the way back.

"You were the one who insisted we do this," Mike retorted darkly.

"I know, but it's been set with a scientific precision! I'm never going to get it back to fitting perfectly again."

"You good, Mike?" Will, ever the empath, interrupted Dustin and checked on Mike from the back seat. Mike caught his eye in the rearview mirror and nodded in reassurance. Will gave him an encouraging smile and sat back.

Mike put his hands on the wheel, fought off the lurch of his stomach, and shifted into drive.

And shockingly... it was easy.

Mike almost wanted to laugh at himself. The anticlimactic feeling of

moving forward on the pavement was almost hilarious. After a twenty feet or so, Dustin cheered. Mike rolled his eyes but found himself smiling all the same. Wheels under his control, he slowly accelerated from 10 miles an hour to 15 and beyond, until he was moving in wide loops through the huge parking lot at 25 mph like not a day had passed.

The threatening sense of flashback was surely eating at the edge of his brain, but it felt washed out by something else... something new... something fresh.

Maybe it was the cloud that he was still floating on from the night before. Or, maybe it was the slew of other fears that he had recently faced. Or maybe... probably... it was her.

It was almost like he could almost hear her there beside him, her calm composure filling the car as her hand ghosted in his, just like it had the first time that they had jumped, reminding him that maybe, just maybe, this didn't need to define him anymore...

"I want to try the road." Mike said, not asking. He turned the wheel toward the exit of the parking lot.

"Whoa, are you sure?" Dustin asked, a trill of hesitation in his voice.

Will slapped Dustin on the shoulder from the back seat, "He's doing great. Go for it, Mike."

Only when he reached the exit and flipped on the turn signal did the first spike of true anxiety arise. It wasn't a very busy street, but it was busy enough to make him second guess himself. He inched forward a little more slowly than he would have in the past, the barrier in his mind shaking a bit against the compounded fear that he was trying to block out. Yet, he managed to do it. Easing onto the road, he had to admit, it all felt a little bit... normal.

Which was nice. For, before everything had happened, Mike had really truly enjoyed this.

Driving had once been a place where Mike could clear his mind. It was a habit, moving through the dark streets and winding back roads

of Hawkins in his mom's hand-me-down car. It was an escape. A solace. A safe space to wait out the yelling at home.

Those years had been rough in the Wheeler household, and in reply Mike had escaped to the road more than he'd cared to admit. He did so alone at first, but as the months progressed he began to take his little sister in tow, opting to save her from the growing toxicity of their parents in the same way that he saved himself, and in those years they forged their bond.

In their late night drives they'd developed some rituals. They'd get milkshakes in the drive-thru or candy from the convenience store with money that Mike had swiped from his mom's purse. They'd drive through the backwood roads, listening to Holly's favorite songs, Mike begrudgingly singing the melody as Holly pieced out the high harmonies like she was a pop star. They did anything they could to avoid the topic. To avoid the lies. To avoid the shaky foundation that their family had turned out to be.

As the years passed and things in their home didn't get better, Mike's morale for the situation began to fade. College came and, in reply, Mike couldn't shake his guilt that Holly was now stuck in the middle alone. For, with just one child left in the house, it seemed as though his parents had forgotten that Holly was there at all. The house was still pristine, but under the surface there was burgeoning alcoholism, disdain, a growing consistency of tv dinners, and disagreements that echoed from the walls. Disagreements about anything and everything. Money, infidelity, and unraveling threats of breaking it all down.

It should have broken Mike's heart, but honestly it just pissed him off. He grew darker when he was there, until one night during spring break of his sophomore year, Mike simply snapped. Snagging his sister's arm and marching them out the door after a few bellowed words that he got into the fray.

It was the last time he was behind the wheel -

"Mike! Change lanes!" Dustin cried. "You're getting - !?"

Mike smashed back to reality with a start. Cars whizzed past his

driver's side, laying on their horns, passing him so quickly that he felt like he had been flung into a tailspin. A clap of thunder boomed from the sky above him at the exact same moment. In a snap of fright, Mike saw his knuckles go white on the steering wheel.

"Change lanes! You're going on -"

- But he couldn't - His brain could not catch up with his body's response - Fingers frozen on a path to -

"- the interstate -"

"Fuck!" Mike cried through gritted teeth. His breath went tight as big drops of water began to hit the windshield, blurring his vision in a way that washed out the present day.

- He could only see it in flashes, but it stole his entire mind -

- The instant storm - the thin winding road - the careen of the hydroplane - the blue mailbox flashing through his headlights with a blindingly bright intensity - the squeal of his tires mixing with his sister's screams - his foot paralyzed on the brakes that did nothing at all - the incoming darkness of the massive tree trunk, coming so close that he saw his life flash before his eyes - the instant wrenching STOP, tossing his sister, always trying to not wear a seatbelt, forward - the pale visage in a flash - the crumpled hood of the car despite... despite... - the blood trickling from Holly's hairline, her eyes closed, unconscious, so desperately needing a hospital that he instantly spun his car around from its stop and drove back to town as fast as he could... the car still running all the way -

...The next thing Mike knew, the rain was coming down in sheets and he was steering Dustin's car onto a gravel strip at the side of the road. He threw the car into park, his breath catching so fast that he fell forward, his forehead collapsing onto the steering wheel.

Everything was quiet for a moment, the rain insulating and assaulting him at the same time, both trapping him in his flashback and reminding him that, outside, life still moved on.

After time undeterminable, Will's hand appeared on his shoulder.

"Here, drink some water."

Mike took the water and leaned back in the driver's seat, tears biting at his eyes as he tried to fight away the visions of the flashback. He let his eyes unfocus onto the ceiling of the car, his attention flicking from tiny dot to tiny dot of stains on the interior, helping him return to the moment in an innocuous way.

"I'm... so sorry," Mike gasped, shame seeping over his chest. To their credit, neither of them said anything. "I - " his throat almost hurt to talk, "I'm done for the day."

"Yeah, yeah of course," Dustin said in an understanding yet slightly frazzled tone. "Let's just uh, let the rain chill out a bit and then I'll drive us home. It was uh... good there for a while."

"You don't have to encourage me. That was horrible."

"It really wasn't as bad as you think," Will said, "You just veered off the road really fast but everything else was fine."

"Really?" Mike asked, a frisson of fresh fear coursing through his veins. "Seemed way worse than that."

"No, really. You did okay! It was a good first go," Dustin said, some pep returning to his voice. "Maybe we can try again later this week."

"I'm busy." Mike barked back in an involuntary instinct. "I have training for my summer TA teaching for the next two days."

"Well, what about Wednesday then."

That wasn't happening, but Mike didn't have the energy to retort.

"Mike's coming with me to Hawkins on Wednesday," Will interjected, taking ten pounds of weight off of Mike's chest with a well placed lie.

"Y-yeah," Mike agreed, "Gonna go spend the day with Holly."

That was how Mike found himself back in a car for the first time in days on Wednesday morning. Will's trip to see his mom and visiting

brother had turned into the perfect cover for Mike to get as far away from another 'driving lesson' as possible.

Which, to be honest, he didn't know if he could handle.

The fallout from Sunday's attempt had been difficult, to say the least. It had now been three nights and Mike had hardly slept during any of them. Insomnia was an old familiar foe. It was something he had gotten a hold on over the years, but in the wake of a fresh flashback it was hard to shake.

It had leached the color out of his days, stealing the euphoria he'd had on Saturday and replacing it with shame, embarrassment, and something far more sinister that he didn't want to name.

He had found himself night after night desperately pouring over his old notebooks, just like he always had before. The theories he'd had... the countless calculations.... The questions and confusions... They still led to nowhere. Nowhere but dead ends and fears for his sanity.

Sanity that he desperately needed back.

"Can you take the back road into town?" Mike asked Will, trying to keep his voice steady.

Will looked over at him with a knowing reticence. "I - do you think that's a good idea?"

"It's not a bad idea," Mike replied, "I just... I need to see the spot. I want to check something."

Will sighed, "Mike, we've checked dozens of times..."

"Then it'll just give me peace of mind," he said shortly, trying to bite back his frustration. "Please?"

Will caved. "Okay."

Within a few moments they got off at the interstate exit labeled Gas City, one exit before the main drag to Hawkins. Will knew exactly where to drive and where to turn. After the short drive through the

small town of Gas City, Will turned northeast onto an increasingly windy road that went through mostly undeveloped woods. It was not commonly traveled, yet it cut easily into the back of Hawkins near his parent's home.

Back in the day it been Mike's favorite drive, the woods and the winding making him feel so very far away from the suburban flatland of Hawkins that seemed to spread all around. Yet, in the aftermath, it felt almost haunted.

Mike gritted his teeth as Will wound down the narrow path, his heartbeat feeling thick against his chest in a way that made him feel both idiotic and overwhelmed at the same time.

It had been a long time since Mike had checked the spot. He was sure that he wasn't going to find anything new after all of this time, but the needling frustration still begged for a peek all the same. It was a desperate request, yet it was something he needed to understand.

Will stopped at the exact location that he always did, pulling off onto the gravel across the street from the shrouded driveway where it had all occurred. Mike's fingers rattled a bit against the door handle as he pushed it open and stepped out of the car. Tilting a bit, he peered through the trees, careful to ensure that the vehicles in the deeply recessed driveway were gone for the day. After one time when they had been chased off the land, the owner of the property clearly not wanting visitors, he had been much more careful.

The coast looked clear.

Mike felt the familiar bile rise in his throat as he trotted across the empty road toward the unforgettable blue mailbox and large tree that he knew all too well. Will's door slammed softly behind him and footsteps joined him on the way.

Passing the mailbox, he moved hesitantly toward the tree, desperate for it to be different this time. Yet, just like every other time, it held the same truth.

"No scar."

"It's been a few years now," Will offered.

"A collision like that would leave permanent damage." Mike said. He shook his head, his heart almost dropping in stupid predictable disappointment.

He would never, no matter how hard he tried, understand. And that was the plague.

It wasn't the accident or the mistake that haunted Mike. It wasn't the injuries that had left Holly with a concussion that took her months to heal... though that was terrible in and of itself. No, it was the pieces of the puzzle that would never match. It was the sense of unreality that coated his mind when he let it lead. The fear that came with it was so debilitating, leaving him with a terrible sensation that he couldn't trust his own mind.

And if he couldn't trust his own mind... what could he trust?

"Maybe there was something in the road that you didn't see." Will offered, just as he did every time. "You clearly hit something. There was a collision with your car. I really don't think you hit the tree."

"I would have seen it," Mike replied immediately. He stamped past the mailbox and crossed the road back to the car.

He didn't speak for the rest of the drive.

About twenty minutes later, Will dropped him off in front of his house. He was endlessly patient despite Mike's stormy demeanor, making Mike feel bad in a way that he didn't quite know how to express. He thanked him, their plan set to head back to Indianapolis after dinner.

Mike hurried up the front walk and shouldered the door open to the house, the tightness in his chest feeling so obscenely heavy. He tried to mask it for his sister's benefit as he called her name.

"Holly?"

"Mike!?"

Rough footsteps clambered down the stairs. Holly, still only 5' 2" despite being sixteen, rounded the corner on the stairs with a smile, her blonde hair swinging in a clean ponytail.

"Ugh, I'm so glad you're home," she said, pulling Mike into a quick hug. She pulled away and spun into the kitchen. "Mom is being the worst. I cannot begin to tell you what a shit her new boyfriend is."

"There's a new boyfriend?" Mike groaned, following her into the kitchen. On instinct, he took a peek in the fridge. He grabbed a string cheese and leaned against the appliance to open it.

Holly dramatically rolled her eyes. "I texted you about it on Monday. You didn't reply," she deadpanned, shooting him a look.

"Sorry, it's been a... shit few days."

Her expression instantly changed as she caught his eye. His eyes traced up to the scar at her hairline. He fought back the shudder of guilt that threatened to weaken his knees.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing," he said, averting his eyes to his snack, his interest suddenly focused on the packaging.

"Bullshit," she said. She put her hands on her hips in a way that reminded him so very much of Nancy, "Spill it."

Mike cringed. His voice was low and quiet when he spoke. "The guys made me try driving."

His shudder was echoed in Holly's eyes. She bit her lip. "I'm going to guess it didn't go well."

"I don't... wanna talk about it," he said with a dismissive wave. "What's up with mom's new boyfriend?"

Holly scrutinized him for a moment, her eyes heavy on him in a way that made him sure that she was not going to let the last subject go. Yet, she surprised him, shrugging as she leaned against the counter opposite of him and shook her head.

"He's a dick."

"What else is new?" Mike asked, "That's mom's type."

"Yeah, but this guy is a dick in the exact same way as Dad," Holly replied, tightness behind her bright eyes. "He doesn't listen. He doesn't look at her. He's distant unless he has an opinion and then he's a fucking asshole."

"How long has he been around?" Mike asked. "Can't be long."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Two weeks or so."

"Then he'll be gone next week," Mike said with a wry shrug. "At least she's predictable."

Holly let out a laugh. "You're terrible and you're right."

Mike looked around the house, the walls of the place feeling a little too tight for his liking. "Want to go get lunch? My treat?"

"Okay," Holly agreed, her smile perking back up as her eyes glittered with something menacing and excited. "But I'm driving."

Mike shuddered dramatically, "That's terrifying."

Holly scoffed. "You know I got my license last month."

"I know but... wow," Mike said, his eyes big and teasing. "It almost makes me want to drive just so I don't have to experience it."

Holly dug her keys out of her pocket and held them up to Mike with a dare, "Have at it, then."

"Yeah, no thanks," Mike replied with a dark laugh. "I'll endure it. Where do you want to go?"

"There's a new bakery on the edge of the old downtown that has really good sandwiches. And they make really cute cookies."

"You think I'm going to buy you lunch and dessert?" Mike replied, tugging lightly on Holly's pony tail as he passed her out of the

kitchen. "I'm a grad student. You probably have more money than me."

"Fine," she scoffed. "I'll buy the cookies then. Cheapskate."

There was something about Holly's presence that always seemed to settle Mike. In the wide world of things that piqued his anxiety, she held a unique space of being neutral. Maybe it was because they had been through so much of it together, leaving no need to explain. Whatever it was, though, he couldn't deny that it felt like a major relief.

He fell into her wake as she led the way to her car and to lunch.

The sun was shining and the air was warm for the first time in days, and within the sunlight of the drive to Hawkins, El had found a quiet comfort. It had been raining almost nonstop since Sunday, thunderstorms popping off here and there, causing her to lose sleep, her startled nervous system harangued in a way that she could hardly bear.

She hated this time of year, when storm after storm blew through the region. The electricity in the air pulsed against her like the old wife's tale of a broken bone that could predict the rain. It left her with a dulled headache, frayed nerves, a tight neck and too many hours hiding in a dark room to minimize it at all.

Heavy boot steps trailed in her ears from the hallway of the police station, bringing to her attention the arrival of her dad. She was tucked away in his office twisting streamers for Flo's retirement lunch. A donut dropped in front of her on her end of the desk.

"Sorry about that. Old Man Harrison's called in four emergencies this week. Every time it's been because the neighbor's dog broke into his chicken coop."

"You're doing such important work, dad," El quipped with a smirk.

"Shut up," he replied with a light flick to her hair. "How you doing? Good week?"

El shuddered, "If a good week is a week where I can't dive because it won't stop raining, so instead I just hide from the lightning under the blankets for three days, then sure, great week."

Her dad looked up, examining her features, "No sleep, huh?"

She shook her head, her eyes darting down to the donut as she reached out for it.

"You've been off work all week?"

"Yeah," she sighed, "Just been watching too many movies and waiting for the weather to even out."

"Yeah, that's fair. You holding up okay, though?"

"Not terribly. I feel like shit, though. Today is a nice break. I like the sun," she picked up a multi-colored streamer from where it laid on the lap on her dress. "So, how do you want me to set up?"

"Hold on," Hopper said with a laugh, holding up his hand. "I just got back. You don't need to run off and set up right away."

Hopper took a seat, his gaze upon her in a way that she knew too well. She narrowed her eyes. "You look like you want to ask a question."

"Well, that's probably because I want to ask a question," he said, leaning back heavily into his chair. "Anything else happen with that... thing last week?"

El had been prepared for this topic, but it still took work for her to even out her expression. "Nope," she said, the lie feeling traitorous on her lips.

"You ever find out his last name? What was his first name, Mike?"

El scoffed. "Don't act like you had to work to recall his name. I'm sure you've scanned the files of every Mike in Indiana by now."

Her dad feigned insult. "Give me some credit. Only the ones in Indianapolis."

"Well uh... there's nothing to worry about."

El was impressed by the steadiness of her statement. For, the steadiness of her voice didn't match her internal world at all. She was both counting the hours until he saw Mike again. He was the only thing she had thought about in the indeterminable hours that she had laid in the dark, jumping between losing herself in the thought of his touch and trying to piece out how to say to him what she needed to say.

Her dad looked at her suspiciously for a moment, but much to her surprise, he didn't dig. "Okay, but you'll keep me updated?"

"There's nothing to update but I'll keep you updated," she said, "Now, what do you need me to do?"

"Just run next door to the new spot, pick up the lunch order and the cake, and then lay it all out in the break room and set up all of these decorations you've cluttered my desk with."

"Easy, do they have a tab like the other place?"

"Yep, just tell them to charge it to Hawkins PD. Flo already called the order in."

"For her own party?" El scoffed. "You made her do that?"

"Give me some credit," Hopper replied, waving her criticism off with his hand. "She did it before I got in today. She wanted to set everything up before you got here but I wouldn't let her."

"Should I go now?" El asked, peeking out of the window behind her dad's chair.

"Yeah, it's probably ready."

It was only a few minutes later that El was out of the door, feeling lighter than she had felt in days, her Dad's acquiescence regarding information on Mike washing over her with a massive relief.

It seemed simple. El was a twenty five year old woman, after all! She deserved to have a private life! And if that meant keeping Jim

Hopper out of the potential blowback of a dangerous attraction as much as possible, then so be it.

The bell to the bakery dinged as she entered and made her way up to the counter. It was a small place with a deep wall of booths, the large wall of windows facing the back of the police station in a parallel line. A friendly looking middle aged woman with red hair and flour on her hands appeared through a couple of saloon doors that led to the kitchen.

"Hi," El said. "I'm picking up an order for Hawkins PD?"

"Flo's last day, huh?" the lady asked as she dug through her tickets by the register.

"Yep."

"Well, darling," she said, looking over her shoulder to the order window. "It should still be about five minutes. Feel free to take a seat."

And with that, she disappeared back to the kitchen.

El turned, surveying the new bakery for an empty spot.

"...El?!"

El spun in surprise only for her eyes to land on the very last person in the world she could have expected to see.

"Mike?"

He was staring at her, his jaw slack, his dark eyes wide. His messy hair flounced and his glasses fell askew as he jumped up quickly from his seat, almost stumbling over his feet as moved in her direction. A hurried rush of awkwardness swept over her as he neared, her arms jittery as she tried to piece out what to do. Yet, she needn't have worried, for Mike swept her up in a quick hug that caught her completely off guard.

All of the days in between, the panics and the storms and the loss of sleep, flashed away in an instant as he hugged her tight yet fast, his

presence assaulting her senses in a way that made warmth spike through her limbs. His green t-shirt was soft against her cheek where she pressed for the briefest moment, his scent clean and calming yet frenzying all at the same.

He pulled away quickly, adjusting his glasses as he smiled down at her, bewildered.

" - What are you – "

"- Are you – "

" - Sorry, you first."

"What are you doing here?" El asked, trying and failing to keep her voice casual.

"I'm from here?" Mike replied, confusion knitting his brow. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm... I'm from here, too..." El replied. "well..."

Mike's jaw dropped so fast that she thought he might have hurt himself, "Wait... really?!"

"Um. kind of...? Not really. I don't - I'm just picking up an order for my dad's office?"

"Oh, your dad works around here?" Mike asked, fascinated.

El's eyes slipped to the building through the window. "Yeah, nearish..." She regarded Mike again, almost needing to shake her head to make sense of the moment. "I'm sorry, this is just really unexpected," she smiled softly. "Hi."

"Hey," Mike replied, shifting on his feet.

"Do you - do you want to join us?" he asked, motioning over to the booth and a blonde teenager who was watching them with very curious look on her face.

"Um... sure," she said with a shrug. "I'm waiting for the order so I

won't be here long but... sure,"

"Cool, great. Yeah, so. Right," Mike stuttered, motioning over his shoulder again before he turned on his heel and led the way back to the booth. "Um. This is my sister, Holly. Holly, this is... this is El."

Holly held her hand out as Mike took a seat and El followed behind. El instantly noticed the amusement in the girl's eyes. "Hi," Holly said. "Tell me, how do you know my brother?"

"Um..." El said, her attention glancing quickly to Mike and back to Holly. "He took my class?"

"Really?" Holly asked. She leaned forward on her hands with an almost too sweet smile. "And what do you teach, El?"

"Skydiving."

El's answer was clearly not what Holly had expected. Her attention swung to her brother like whiplash. "You went skydiving? You. You went skydiving?!"

El winced as she looked back at Mike. A light blush lit up the freckles that danced across the bridge of his nose.

"You don't have to sound so surprised," Mike said, looking down at his coffee cup. "But yeah. The guys took me for my birthday."

Holly almost vaulted across the table as she smacked her brother's arm. "Why wouldn't you tell me something like that?!"

"Because I knew you'd act like this!" Mike said quickly. He turned to El with an apologetic look, "Ignore Holly. She's very protective of me."

"So, El," Holly continued, undeterred, "Wh – "

"Order up for Hopper!"

El winced at the call of her name. "That's me," she said hesitantly, "I should go. But it was good to see you..."

"Yeah, you too. And in Hawkins?" his eyes raked her face with an intense sense of confusion, but it melted into something shy as he met her eyes, "I'll uh. I'll see you tomorrow? Seven still good?"

A smile quirked onto El's lips. She nodded, "Yeah. You have my address. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Great," he said, mirroring her look.

"Order for Hopper!"

El shook her head, scrambling up. "Um... Bye. It was nice to meet you, Holly."

"Bye, El!" Holly called, all smiles and waves. El waved back, taking one last glance at Mike, who hadn't looked away, before she turned and gathered the bag of sandwiches and the cake box from the lady at the counter. El darted from the store, her brain exploding with more questions than she could possibly conceive.

Mike watched El through the window in a daze. Her light blue dress dusted right above her knees as she hurried along the sidewalk... in Hawkins....

His heart was in his throat, mixed with a spike of shock and splendor. Throughout the last couple of days, he'd felt a growing nervousness for Thursday night. His confidence shaken, his worries intense. But the second that he saw her at the counter, prim and summery, her hair sweeping down against her shoulders in a way he had never seen, all of his nervousness had seemed to fade. And when she turned to him, her smile lighting up her face he -

"You jumped out of a plane with that girl. You jumped out of a plane PERIOD? You, Mike Wheeler, jumped out of a plane - "

El turned the corner by the police station and disappeared from view. Begrudgingly, he turned back to his sister.

"You're in love with that girl," Holly stated.

Her arms were crossed, her expression matter of fact.

Mike rolled his eyes, the presence of his sister suddenly more annoying than he cared to admit. For, his cheeks were flustered and his eyes were wide. His breath was short and his lips were frozen into a gobsmacked crooked smile. He definitely didn't want his sister to see him like this. "I'm not in love with her. That's crazy."

"There's absolutely no other reason why you'd agree to jump out of a plane."

Mike trained all of his attention onto grabbing a fry and dipping it so as to avoid the prying eyes of the girl across the table. "Well, I can't be in love with her. I've only known her for two and a half weeks."

"Ooh, and how many times have you seen her in this very specific amount of time that you seem to have memorized?"

"Four times," he said, more quietly than before.

"Wow," Holly cried. She dropped her hands on the table. "You know that number right off the top of your head."

"Holly..." Mike groaned.

"WAIT?!" Holly gasped. She reached out and latched onto Holly's arm. "Were you just confirming a date? Did you actually get up the courage to ask her out?"

"How little do you think of me?" Mike retorted, "Yeah, I'm taking her out tomorrow."

"Mike Wheeler," Holly said with a chastising air, "you have a date and you didn't tell me?"

"Because I knew you'd act like this!"

It was then that she dropped the act like she always did, her annoying kid sister demeanor fading in an instant, almost to the point where her voice changed. Her smile became more genuine. "Mike. That's really cool. I'm happy for you. That's big. She's cute. A little weird. Eagle eyes, but that seems like it would be your type so.."

"- God, Holly -"

"I'm just saying she seems like a good fit for you. How did you not know she was from here?"

"How did you hear that?" He asked, sure he had only said it ten feet away.

"One, I have excellent eavesdropping skills. Two, you were practically yelling. It was awkward. She looks your age, you don't know her from school?"

Mike shook his head, his bewildered stupor overcoming him once again, "I'm almost certain of it... One of the guys would have remembered her if we did... I think she's told me she was homeschooled though..."

"Aww, Mike!" Holly cooed, swooning dramatically in the booth across from him. "What if she was under your nose the whole time and you crossed paths over and over again and you never even knew it?!"

Mike replied with an eye roll, the prospect too big for him to entertain. "I highly doubt that."

El drove out of town, her eyes wide upon the road.

The afternoon had gone off without a hitch, but she hardly remembered any of it at all. Her brain was simply spinning. She had known that Mike was from near Indianapolis, but not in a million years had she expected that he was from the very town that she had been in and around for the entirety of her hidden life.

It was almost on instinct that she decided that her drive to Indianapolis could wait. Her dad's cabin was calling her name in the way that it always did when she had something on her mind. The cabin felt almost like a neutral zone, removed and recessed. Always an excellent space to think.

Neglecting the main road, El took a left turn. She winded down the zig zagging rural path, the trees growing thicker by the mile. Eventually, she slowed at a familiar bend. The blind drive was shrouded by the thick leaf cover of a large tree by the road. The blue

mailbox marked the entry, just as it always had, in a way that she couldn't miss.

She steered into the driveway of home.

Leave me a note below or find me on tumblr at el-borealis or IG at el_borealis - I'd love to hear what you're thinking!

- L -

7. Chapter 7

Hi everyone! It's been a while with this fic, but never fear, we're still rolling!

Mike watched as the sun sank to twilight behind the rooftops across the street. He couldn't remember the last time he'd sat like this on his childhood front step, but he was sure that his legs had been shorter at the time. As it was, they stretched out long in front of him as he waited for Will's car to appear from around the corner.

The hours after lunch had taken an unexpected turn. Holly had decided to run to the mall with her friend, leaving Mike alone for the rest of the day. He attempted to use the time wisely. There was work to be done for the introductory summer session he was about to begin teaching. Lesson plans needed finalizing. Materials needed organization. A lot to do.

His mind, though, had other ideas, and before he knew it something else was laid out in front of him, primed for study. Hawkins yearbooks. Dust riddled and brittle, the collection he'd amassed from his and Nancy's rooms covered about fifteen years of Hawkins educational rosters.

The afternoon passed unknowingly to Mike as he leafed through each one, searching for any trace of one El Hopper. Book after book, he turned up nothing. However, that wasn't too much of a surprise. El had alluded more than once to an unorthodox upbringing which had mostly bypassed the normalcy of traditional school. Yet, he *had* remembered she'd said she'd gone to school at some point. So, Mike kept looking. Kindergarten through Senior Year.

No El Hopper appeared. Honestly, no Hoppers appeared at all.

Mike didn't know why exactly, but it plagued him. The knowledge that El could have *been there*, near him? It made him ache with an odd sense of longing. It almost felt as though a hole had suddenly become apparent in his past, one where she belonged. Or maybe it was just amplified because... that was how he felt now.

Something about her just felt...so right.

When Mike had spotted El in the bakery the swoop in his stomach had been so intense that he was glad he wasn't standing. It wasn't just the fact that he was seeing her in Hawkins. It was simple surprise of seeing her at all. After so many days of feeling like absolute shit, seeing her face light up when he called out her name felt like taking a deep gulp of air after choking.

It was a feeling he had surely never felt before.

....Maybe Holly was onto something...

Mike shook his head to dislodge the thought. That was *crazy*. Hilariously premature. He'd hardly even known her for three weeks. Can you fa... it *possible* to feel like... that... after just three weeks?

It was probably for the best that this particular train of thought was interrupted. Will pulled up to the curb at that moment and Mike jumped to standing. He made for the passenger door only to stop short as he saw that the car was not empty.

"I'm sorry, hun. I can move to the back," Mrs. Byers said from the rolled down window as she reached for the door handle.

"It's fine, Mrs. Byers. I'll jump in the back."

Mrs. Byers smiled her trademark nervous smile as Mike pulled the back door open and found that the backseat, too, was partially taken.

"How you been, Mike?" Jonathan asked as he shuffled over on the seat and made space.

"Not bad, you?" Mike asked.

"Doing alright. Checking out what's changed in Hawkins. Which, surprise surprise, isn't much."

"We were just coming back from dinner," Will cut in from the driver's seat. "Thought I'd grab you before we drove past home on the way out of town."

"Yeah, of course," Mike replied easily as he clipped his seat belt and tried to adjust his long legs against the back of the passenger seat.

"So, was Mike there for this big explosion?" Jonathan asked Will.

"Yeah," Will replied. "I'm telling you, it was weird."

"Was it as crazy as Will's telling it?" Jonathan asked casually, turning back to Mike.

Mike hid the guilty look from this face, his mind flitting to what he had *actually* been doing when it had occurred. "I uh... I only saw the aftermath, but it was definitely bizarre. I can't really figure out how it could've happened. It doesn't make sense."

"I'm telling you," Mrs. Byers said adamantly, "It sounds exactly like what happened at home."

Mike's brow curled in surprise. "Something like that happened at your house? When?"

Jonathan and Will's sighs at Mike's question were subtle, but having known them almost as well as family, he picked up on the subtext all the same.

"Mom," Jonathan said with a subtle eye roll, "That was just bad wiring."

"You weren't there," Mrs. Byers replied with an exasperated laugh. "Mike, it was a long time ago. Must have been 12? Maybe 13 years ago? Feels like a lifetime. I think you boys were in middle school. Did the explosion burn out the light sockets? Will didn't know."

"I... I didn't look. Did the light sockets burn out at your house?"

"Yeah. Oh, it was so scary. The boys were out, I think Will was at your house, actually. I was just watching TV when it turned to static and the lights spiked to this really bright glow. Then, I hate remembering this, a couple of the bulbs just popped. I swear, I'm still paying off the electrical work I had to charge on my credit card."

"Really?" Mike asked, curiosity fully piqued. "Did you ever find out

what caused it?"

"I tried," she said, "I had the electrical company come out but they just said it wouldn't happen again. Tried the cops, but he - they pushed me off, *of course*," she said, her voice going harsh as she seemed to experience the memory. "Anyway, the electrician who fixed it said he'd never seen anything like it. I still think it was the lab. The electrician did too."

Mike leaned forward in an instant. "Wait, the lab?"

Jonathan chuckled. "I'm sure he was just toying with you, mom."

"He was not," Mrs. Byers retorted, shaking her head as Will turned into the Byers driveway. "Plus, with all of the stories out of that place I wouldn't be surprised."

At that point, Will put the car in park and the conversation faded off in an instant. Mike waved and took the front seat as the family said their goodbyes outside of the car. Buckling his seatbelt into the passenger seat, his eyes grazed across the dark thick of trees off to the far side of the house.

The lab.

It had been years since he'd thought about the laboratory on the other side of the woodlands. They'd only ventured to that side of the woods a couple of times when they were kids, but each time they ended up there he remembered one thing: It had seemed like an impenetrable fortress. Heavy barbed wire fences concealed the oddly tall and menacing looking buildings that laid beyond. It had given him the creeps.

Will got back in the car and put the gear shift in reverse.

"So, what do you think?" Mike said, his eyes scanning the black trees once again. "Was the thing at that bar the same type of thing that happened at your mom's house?"

Will snickered and shook his head, "I honestly have no idea. You know my mom. Love her, but she always chooses the weirdest possible explanation for everything."

That was all that Will had to say on the topic. Usually, Mike would have pushed for more, his curiosity itchy and sometimes uncontrollable. Yet tonight, it only took a short moment for Mike's thoughts to return to the seemingly more important mystery on his mind.

"Guess who I ran into," Mike said. His voice pitched higher than he would have liked, absolutely betraying his attempt at a neutral tone.

Will looked over curiously, his eyebrow raised in amusement. "Who?"

"El," Mike said. He averted his eyes as he said her name, grateful for the darkness as the corners of his lips turned up.

"Your El? Here?"

"She's not *my* El, but yeah. At that new bakery down by the police station. Did you know that she's *from* here?"

"What?" Will asked in surprise. "No she's not."

"That's what she said," Mike replied adamantly. "She once told me she was homeschooled or something, so maybe she was here. I don't know. I only saw her for a minute. You don't know any Hoppers here, do you?"

Will made a thoughtful noise as he pulled onto the main highway. "Hopper definitely sounds familiar. I'm sure Mom knows someone with that name, but I'm not placing it. Maybe El was just visiting family here or something."

Mike shrugged as an odd let down washed over him, "Yeah, maybe."

Will didn't say anything else and Mike kept to himself the rest of the ride, his curiosity still poking at him like mad. It wound through his mind and stuck like glue, and he wasn't exactly proud of where it took him next. Before he knew it, he was home with his laptop open in his dark bedroom, his fingers reaching for the keyboard. "Hopper Hawkins Indiana" was typed into the search bar.

It brought up three names in the public registries; two full listings and one listing that was highly redacted. A series of police reports

from the weekly register section of the Hawkins Post, all naming one Chief James Hopper, the same name as the redacted listing, populated the rest of the first page.

None of them pointed to an 'El' at all.

It was almost instantly that Mike felt a shameful sense of unease. The whole activity made him feel more like a creepy stalker than he cared to admit. El deserved better than a deep dive internet snoop. He could just ask her the next day, you know, on their *date*.

God, their date. It was only hours away. Mike's smile was yet again involuntary.

The hours somehow still felt too long.

Mike closed the tab where the search for her had been, and tapped his fingers absentmindedly against the keys. He needed a distraction. He needed something, anything other than her, to focus on.

That was what brought him to his next query.

He popped his fingers, set them back on the keys, and quickly began to type.

Sure, Mrs. Byers had always been a little bit out there with her ideas. She was definitely a character, but over the years he'd grown to trust her. She'd been the only person to believe his account of what had actually happened during his accident. His jarringly unhinged memory of the experience was so far from the realm of normalcy that everyone else had been worried that he'd suffered brain damage. Not Mrs. Byers, though. She had listened with calm acceptance, as though everything he told her made complete sense. She'd even been the one to encourage him to continue searching for answers if it was going to help him move past it. It was a surprise to get such a gift of acceptance from his friend's mom, of all people, but he'd been deeply grateful to her ever since. So when Mrs. Byers spoke, no matter how out there her thoughts were, Mike tended to listen.

Mike clicked search on:

Hawkins National Laboratory

The depth of the first search results were sparse. A few images of the old building appeared, along with a photo of the sign. An old news article in the Hawkins Post announced its closure, dated from about ten years back.

The facts stopped there.

The search results, however, did not. Not by a long shot. Mike rolled his eyes as he looked at the lower results, all from dubiously named websites. Posts entitled "TOP TEN UNDERRATED CONSPIRACY THEORIES", "INDIANA'S SHADY GOVERNMENT SECRET" and "THE SHADOWED CHILDREN" stared back at him.

He'd definitely heard whisperings around town throughout the years. Unsubstantiated accounts of all the weird things that had supposedly gone on there. He skimmed through tales of psychedelic mind experiments, kidnapped kids, and top secret super powered humans. The writers of these articles seemed to believe everything they wrote so deeply, despite the fact that they seemingly had no more to go on than rumor. One article even contained an anonymous interview with a so-called subject who called herself 'Eight'. It covered an array of creepy accounts, 'powers and gifts', and child abuse allegations, and a man she referred to eerily as 'Papa'.

Whatever he'd been hoping to find, it was not this. The physics of the accounts didn't even line up, at least not for what was known about the capabilities of the human body. Everything sounded much less like a government agency and much more like the setting of a superhero comic.

His attention wandered as the accounts became more and more anecdotal in nature, and his eyelids followed. He fell asleep that night with his computer screen still by his side. An old news clipping of a lab scientist and his seeming subjects stared back at him.

A fresh storm began to boom outside of his bedroom windows.

Mike looked at his watch and groaned. 6:40pm. He was running early. Very early. Embarrassingly early. The walk to El's house had taken much less time than he'd planned. He'd clearly been stuck in

his own head, completely unaware of the world buzzing around him, and it seemed to have delivered him to her neighborhood much earlier than planned.

Damn his long legs. Now he had three short blocks to walk and twenty minutes to do it.

Stopping on the sidewalk, he looked to his right and made no hesitation before stepping inside the shop next to him.

"We're just closing up, do you need something easy?"

"Uh..."

Mike scanned the walls and counter and cursed himself. This split second decision to walk in suddenly seemed much more involved than he would have imagined. He'd never been in a place like this before, and had no clue how to -

"What's she like?" An older woman behind the counter gave him a kind and knowing smile as she asked.

"Um..." *How could one explain El Hopper?* "She's uh... really nice."

"Really...nice?" the woman repeated, her eyebrow raising in amusement.

A relenting smile crossed his lips. "She's fierce and kind of intense but she's also very sweet."

The woman nodded at that explanation, put her finger up to signal him to wait, and walked to the end of her display case. She pulled a bunch of vibrantly orange and yellow daisies from a bin and held them up in offering.

"That's perfect," Mike said with relief. The fiery blaze of the orange coloring against the softness of the petals seemed like an almost perfect fit for the girl in question.

The woman nodded and set them down on a stack of butcher paper to wrap them up. "She'll love them," she said as wrapped a simple bit of twine around the paper, the bright petals peeking out. She turned

and held the fresh bouquet out to him. "And a lucky lady."

"More like lucky me," Mike said quietly as he handed her his debit card. The woman chuckled and rang him up.

It *did* feel like lucky him. He was taking El on a date. A real date. Not one that involved falling through the air or him making an ass of himself (hopefully). An actual, honest to God, *date*. He was nervous, but not in the way he was used to. Honestly, he was almost vibrating with how excited he was to see her. Sure, he'd only just seen her the day before, but it was starting to feel like it had still been too long. A full night just him and her. A chance to get to know her better or at least just an excuse to simply look at her for an entire evening. To listen to her talk. To maybe kiss her again... if he was lucky.

For the first time in the whole week it felt like nothing could go wrong.

Mike waved goodbye to the woman in the flower shop, fingers wrapped firmly around the simple bouquet. The bell jingled behind him as the door closed.

He stopped almost instantly upon reaching the sidewalk.

In an instant he knew: he'd calculated his good feelings far too quickly.

Mike looked up to the sky and bit his lip hard as the colors turned dark grey before his eyes. What he'd sworn had been calm weather just a few minutes before now felt like anything but. An almost tangible shift had occurred in the air. The air was still, but it felt heavy, as though it was glass that would break at the slightest touch.

How had he missed this? Had he really been that distracted? Or had the storm rolled in unannounced? A clash of weather fronts, both placid in their own way, too much for each other until they threatened to explode.

Regardless, Mike knew one thing. He needed to move fast, because the sky was about to burst open.

Low thunder chased him as he turned onto her street, and his feet

picked up pace in reply. Only two blocks to go! He could make it. No big deal. It would be fine!

Feet fast and sure, he made it the length of two houses, moving almost at a run, when -

CRACK

Mike flinched at the power of the lightning that blazed through the sky directly overhead, and instantly broke out into a run.

But it was no use, for the electricity had seemed to rip the clouds clean open.

"Shit!"

In an instant, rain lashed down upon him in a direct hit, like a bucket pouring straight over his head. Mike gasped as the water doused him head to toe. The butcher paper that wrapped the flowers went soft in his grip as he sprinted through the downpour, disintegrating in his hand where he held on. Foggy lenses hid the world through his glasses as he reached the final road, causing his shoe to smash into a deep puddle at the edge of the curb, leaving it waterlogged in a way that sent chills up his spine. Fresh thunder rolled in, making the rain pour even harder.

Finally, after a minute that felt like a water-drenched eternity, Mike spotted the vague outline of her duplex that he seemed to remember from that night a couple weeks back. Desperate for shelter, he stumbled up her walk and onto her covered front steps.

"Shit!"

Gasping for breath, he wiped the water from his brow and whipped off his glasses to peek down at himself. He felt water dripping through his toes and torrents flowing down his scalp and his back. He felt the tightness of his belt against the wet skin of his abdomen.

Truthfully, not a single inch of him was dry.

On top of that, every single flower in his grasp had lost at least a third of their petals, shriveled and sad, beaten by the storm.

They felt so very much like him.

Okay, he'd been wrong, something *could* go wrong. *Did* go wrong. Very wrong.

"Shit."

At a loss, no idea what to do, Mike dropped against the corner of the wall.

DING DONG!

"SHIT!"

Mike jumped off from the wall as the doorbell announced his presence throughout the house inside.

Lightning lashed through her sleep, making her twitch behind the blackness of her eyelids, her body groaning at the tiny assault. She fought it. For, she didn't want to leave. Everything was quiet here. Calm. The hand in hers was comforting and warm, even if for a moment she'd forgotten who or where her dream had taken her. Willing herself just the slightest bit, she regained control of her slumber and slipped back under, the visions of her dream returning before they had fully faded from her grasp. And she was glad, for his lips were back upon hers, his dark hair waving against her forehead, his fingers tightening around her own. The outside world would have heard her contented sigh. This was where she wanted to be, not out there with the storms and the questions. But here, in the soft space inside of her mind where kissing him could be easy.

Yet, another crack, much larger than the first, sounded off... and stole it away.

El's eyes lurched open to the sound of pouring rain. She lifted her head from the cushy arm of her couch, which had served as an accidental pillow that she hadn't meant to use. She wasn't sure when she'd fallen asleep or how, but she wasn't surprised. She hadn't slept much the night before, given the storms, so it wasn't an unexpected conclusion.

Her mind was foggy and in disarray, just as it usually was after a

mid-day nap. She grumbled to herself as she tried to right her awareness to make sense of the -

DING DONG!

El jumped in surprise, and just like the thunder outside, everything came crashing back.

Thursday.

Heart jolting to a panicked beat, she looked up to the clock on the wall and gasped.

6:50pm.

"No no no no no no no - " she moaned, bounding up from the sofa.

Grabbing at her clothes and hair, she paced, eyes bulging. *Of course* this was how it would go. Her head was throbbing in exhausted pain, her hair was a ratted mess, her clothes consisted of a wide necked tee that was falling from her shoulder and her favorite most comfy sweats. and *Mike Wheeler* was at her door, *ten minutes early*, being assaulted by what sounded like yet another terrible thunderstorm.

She wasn't ready.

She hadn't showered! She hadn't dressed! She hadn't even figured out how to get her story straight!

El strangled back a frustrated scream.

It hadn't just been the storms that had kept her awake throughout the night. Mike had also had a surprisingly strong effect on her lack of sleep. No matter how much she'd tried to dismiss it, his appearance inside of the cafe next to her dad's station had been an almost visceral shock to her system. An odd coincidence, to say the least. And highly inconvenient.

He was going to walk through that door looking absolutely wonderful with a head full of *questions*. She was going to need to match him with the utmost restraint and *answers*. And she was going to have to do this in her PJs...

A fresh lash of lightning bolted through the air, combined with a barked "*shit!*" from beyond her front door.

El took a deep breath, not ready at all, and accepted her fate. She helplessly tugged her t-shirt neck up onto her shoulder and ran to the door, flinging it open.

"Mike?!"

Well, she was already wrong about one thing. Mike was in fact *not* looking absolutely wonderful. To the contrary, he looked like he'd been drowned. His dark hair fell in haphazard matted curls against his forehead, his clothing three shades darker than they were meant to be on account of the water they held. His eyes were wide, nervous, and locked on her.

It was on instinct that she reached forward and tugged him inside. The gusts of wind came on harsh from the world outside as she quickly slammed the door. Mike stumbled past her into her small entryway, his breath heavy and full of apologies.

Leaning against the door, she looked up to him.

Mike looked... embarrassed. His cheeks were radiating so much pink heat that they could dry his hair. A puddle was quickly forming on the tiles at his feet.

"Flowers," he said weakly, avoiding her eyes as he offered a sad wet bouquet with slumped shoulders.

El bit her lip, the corners of her smile turning up. In his hand was an understated bouquet of daisies, beat up by the storm but only by a bit. Flecks of the wet butcher paper stuck to her hand as she accepted them.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes turning back up to him. He seemed to chance a glance at her.

Fresh thunder cracked outside, making them both jump.

"I'll uh... stay here! I'll get you - um - " El didn't finish her sentence before she darted from the entryway toward the bathroom. She

quickly grabbed two fresh towels and rushed back, depositing the flowers on the kitchen table as she passed. "I don't know how much these will help, but it's a start?" She offered feebly as she rounded the corner and held out the towels.

Mike took them and muttered a thank you before he began the helpless task of drying himself off. His clothes seemed stuck to his skin, each piece dripping to the point where it needed to be wrung out in order to even begin to dry. She watched him attempt to adjust his shirt, the fabric bunching against his skin like it was glued. Finally, he seemed to give up on the clothes, instead opting to dry his face and hair. He ran the towel over his head vigorously, his hair pitch black against the light blue of the terry cloth.

It was then that she remembered where her mind had just been under the guise of sleep. She felt a blush rise to her cheeks in reply. She had more important things to worry about, but the sensations washed over her all the same and she felt an ache to return there, to his hand in her hair and his lips on hers...

Mike ran the towel across his face, his pale skin shining with dampness, his lips moving with his breath... Finally, he looked up as he dried his neck. He smiled apologetically. "I'm so sorry. This was uh... This was not how I meant to show up at your door."

She smiled back, then. For honestly, it was hard not to. Even in this moment, dripping on her floor at her doorway, he seemed so wonderfully charming. Somehow, the lightning booming outside bothered her just a bit less as she looked at him.

"Wait here, I'll be right back." El darted off once more. She shook her head to return herself fully to reality as she made her way into her bedroom and pulled open the lowest drawer. She rummaged through for anything that might potentially fit someone almost a foot taller than her. She did her best, coming back with a pair of sweats and a random oversized tee.

"Maybe you can put your clothes in my dryer for a bit?" she offered tentatively, "The sweatpants might be too short, but the shirt should fit you."

"Yeah, thanks," he agreed hurriedly, scooping the clothing from her hands and carefully kicking off his shoes on her front mat. He turned, looking at her expectantly. Suddenly, his brow furrowed and his eyes widened. "Did I... Do I have the day wrong?!" He yelped, looking her up and down with a spiraling panicked gaze. "Did I just barge in on you unexpected?! El, I am SO sorry I - "

"No!" she replied, waving her hands to quell his worry, her cheeks going red. Her arms crossed over herself on instinct, "I uh... It's the right night. I just uh..." she cringed. "I fell asleep."

"Oh," was all he said. His expression fell to something of disappointment.

El gulped, "Not because I didn't want to go! I do! I really do! I just... I didn't sleep last night and I passed out on accident - I haven't been sleeping well. I'm sorry I..." she looked down at her disheveled excuse of an outfit and shrugged helplessly.

BANG!

El winced and jumped at the booming thunder clap as Mike cursed in surprise. Fumbling, she pointed deeper into the house. "Do you want to use the bathroom? To change?"

"Oh! Oh, yeah, thanks."

Shuffling back, she gestured for him to follow.

The second he shut the bathroom door, she dashed into her room.

With a surge of shame, she grabbed her hairbrush and yanked it roughly through her hair, attempting to tame something that did not like to be controlled. After a few frustrating seconds she gave up, pulling it carefully into the cleanest ponytail she could manage. Finally, she tugged open her pants drawer and rifled through, grabbing the first pair she liked and kicking off her sweats as quickly as she could, practically jumping into her jeans.

She could only imagine what she looked like to him, ready for bed when he'd obviously put time into getting ready to see her, only to be hit with the worst of luck. She willed her headache to subside and

took a look in the mirror once again, accepting this was the best she could do in two minutes.

Because *Mike* was *in* her house, putting on *her* clothes on the other side of the door. Their plans now tossed asunder with the storm.

What the hell was she going to do with him until the weather subsided?

"Please don't make fun of me."

El hurried to the bedroom doorway as Mike stepped out of the bathroom. His wet clothes were bundled in his hands. The shirt she'd loaned him was oversized on his trim frame. Her sweatpants hardly hit his shins. He looked at her sheepishly.

He looked... ridiculous.

Absolutely adorably ridiculous.

El couldn't help but smile. She bit back a laugh and shook her head apologetically. "I'm sorry, that's all I have. I mean, it's okay. I don't look much better," she said, guesstimating to herself as she stepped close to him and reached for the wet clothes in his hands to put them in the dryer.

"Nonsense," Mike said, "You look gorgeous in anything."

El stopped midstep right in front of him. Her lips twitched up in surprise. "Thank you."

He looked almost surprised himself that he'd said it. The way he was looking at her was hard to ascertain, with his dark hair still wet and plastered to his temples, his skin still glistening with the slightest hint of dampness, his soft freckles apparent in this light, scattered like rain itself across his nose, he was staring down at her in the privacy of her own home, the door closed against the world, the rain hitting the windows like they were trapped alone in a bubble.

Maybe the storm wasn't so bad, after all...

El's heartbeat began to rise.

"So, Hawkins PD huh?" he asked quietly, knocking her ever so slightly out of her reverie as he pointed to the shirt she gave him. She stared at him blankly for a moment before it all clicked. She cursed herself as she realized. Of *all* the things she had to give him to wear she had to give him something that pointed straight to the exact conversation she wanted to avoid.

There was no way she was ready to talk about Hawkins right now. Absolutely not. No way.

So, instead of answering his question, with a rush of adrenaline, her lips found something else to do.

She must've still been a bit addled from her dream because she closed the gap between them and reached up to catch his lips. He moaned in surprise. His hands went slack on the wet clothes he was holding. They fell cold upon their feet. Yet, he kicked them away almost immediately, his hands finding her forearm as her fingers brushed the wet hair at the nape of his neck.

Kissing him was *not* like the dream. Her brain scrambled and her nerves spiked like fire, yet before she knew it, her feet had begun to take steps backward, and her hands had willed him to follow. She didn't feel completely sure how they ended up in her room, knees against the bed until they both fell, his arm wrapped around her waist to cradle her fall, but only part of her was complaining.

The other part of her didn't want to stop.

Falling into her pillow, she pulled herself deeper into him. He followed in kind, an eager tension in his arms bringing her tight against his body. His breath was just as warm against her lips as his hair was cold between her fingers.

Storms raged inside and out.

As she lost herself in his kiss, she willed herself to believe that it could be like the dream. That this was *normal*. That she didn't need to think. She willed herself to believe that she could just enjoy the glorious feeling of Mike's lips on hers, his fingers splayed against the skin on the small of her back where her shirt had ridden up

somewhere along the way. But she could feel the challenge rising in her body, pushing against her skin with a dangerous pulse as Mike's lips left hers and began to crawl down her neck. Her eyes crossed and she tried to control it, yet the buzzing was growing less controllable within her, the -

CRACK!

El screamed and pulled back from Mike as a blinding strike of lightning lit up the room. She grasped at her heart, her breath coming in gusts, as she worked to calm herself down.

It *hadn't* been her... but it almost had been.

That was when she truly, finally, felt awake. Blinding emotion shocked through her, her breath going short and her arms pulling her legs into her chest in an instinctive crouch. Overriding her thoughts was a simple yet jarring smear of shame. It pressed against her heart and made her second guess every move she'd made in the last three weeks.

"El?"

She registered his voice only at his third repetition of her name. She didn't look up. She couldn't.

"I'm sorry," she breathed.

"No, it's okay," he shifted closer to her. "Are you okay?"

What could she say? That she was a danger? A broken uncontrollable beast? That he should get away from her as quickly as humanly possible if he valued his safety? That everything with her was awkward and embarrassing and dangerous? That she was incapable of moderating this thing within her body, and much too reckless with it whenever she got close to him?

"What is it?" His voice was softer this time. Careful. His hand fell upon her shin, his touch soft, calm, more comforting than she'd been ready for.

Tears pricked her eyes and her throat grew thick as she worked to

find the words.

"El..." he whispered once more.

She sighed and finally looked up at him. There was no annoyance in his eyes, their dark depths caught by the dim light of her lamp on the other side of the room. He looked nothing but worried.

God, this was not how she had wanted to do this. Tucked into herself with fear on her own bed fifteen minutes after he arrived. She could hardly even track how they got here, the situation so ill-advised.

Fresh fear sprang from her as she worked to find her voice. Fears what he would say, of the frustration she was about to have to deal with, of the fact that he could so very likely say no and disappear in a heartbeat.

She swallowed.

"Mike?" Her lips shook against words. "I really like you."

He looked at her curiously. His voice was reassuring as he said, "I really like you too."

"I-"

Her voice caught. For, something in the way he was looking at her, warm, worried and patient, struck her in the chest. It caused a pleading rush to surge through her. With it a whole lifetime of words shot to her throat, begging for a voice. Every truth never uttered. Everything she held safe. Every piece of her she had to hide.

For a snapshot of a second she felt like she could tell him everything.

But of course... she couldn't.

El swallowed it down, the surge dying upon her lips with a stab of agony.

The rehearsed words took their place, instead.

"I just, um, maybe this is moving too fast," she pushed the next words

out, "Can we... can we take this slower?"

"Oh yeah!" His hand lifted from her leg instantly as his eyes went wide, "Oh my God, did I - did I do something wrong, or -"

"No," she said, grabbing his wrist to stop him. "You didn't do anything. It's uh... me," she cringed. "I was the one who dragged you in here and now I'm asking you to stop. I'm sorry."

"No, hey no. Don't apologize. It's okay," he said, his voice so very earnest. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just -" she huffed out a heavy breath. "I'm not very experienced in this?"

She peeked her eye at him as she said it. It was the biggest truth she could give. For, she truly *wasn't* experienced in this. Never before had she felt like this when someone touched her, looked at her, said a single word her way.

She'd never felt like this in her entire life.

His brow seemed to relax at her words, a hint of surprise tracing his expression. "Oh," he said simply. His lips turned up in the slightest trace of a smile. "That's okay," he said with a shrug. "I can't say I'm the most experienced in any of this either."

"Oh," she heard herself say, something within her calming the slightest amount for the first time.

He seemed to let his lips go then, turning up into a real smile. "El... I -"

A fresh boom and crash of lightning lit up the entire room. El yelped, flinching toward him, her hand clamping down on his wrist as the electricity tingled through her.

"Wait, are you - are you afraid of the *storm*?" he asked softly.

El sighed. "Yes, I hate them. They make me feel sick."

"Really? What kind of sick?"

"Headaches."

"Do you have a headache now?"

She nodded. "Bad one."

Mike made to move then, almost in an instant. "Do you need medicine? I can go get - "

"No," she grabbed onto his arm again to stop him, "doesn't help. I just have to wait for the..." she pointed to the sky, "for this to pass."

"Oh," Mike replied tentatively.

She let go of his arm, her self consciousness growing once again. Mike was quiet for a moment. The rain pelting the window was the only sound in the room.

"Hey El?" he finally said, "Can I try something?"

She looked up, "What?"

"Just... trust me." He then began adjusting himself to the top of the bed. His hand came gently to her shoulder as he tilted her ever so slightly. "Here, turn this way."

"Okay?"

She did as he told her, shifting her body away from him as he moved to sit behind her.

"Now, just relax and tell me if it's too much."

"Okay? I – ohhh..."

El fell silent as Mike hands dropped against her neck. Her eyes slipped shut at his touch and, in an instant, a kaleidoscope of colors appeared behind her eyelids. His fingers kneaded into her neck at the base of her skull with a precision like she'd never felt.

Through his touch, everything began to slip away. Slowly, she forgot about her headache and the storm outside. She forgot her nerves and

her worries. She forgot about the sheer awkwardness of the last twenty minutes. She forgot the fire in her veins...

All she could feel was Mike's hands moving with surprising awareness from spot to spot, his fingers and thumbs running pressured circles into her skin and the muscles below, sending shivers up and down her entire body.

"You're... wow, you're really good at this," she breathed, her voice low as her shoulders dropped another notch.

"This is good?" he asked softly.

"Yes. How do you know..." she let out a sigh, "y-you're just... really good at this."

His hands walked down to her shoulders, his thumbs notching under the wide neck of her shirt to trace her shoulder blades directly on her skin. "My sister Holly used to get really bad migraines," he said as he worked. "She got a concussion a few years back so I would do this to help her out. So much of headaches and migraines can be helped with blood flow, and massage is a really good way to do that."

El found herself smiling. "You sound like a good brother."

"Yeah, well the concussion was kind of my fault so don't praise me too much. I owed it to her."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. She's okay now. She just wasn't wearing her seatbelt when I got in a wreck. She smacked her head and broke her wrist."

"Oh, wow," El said, turning over her shoulder in surprise. "Were you okay?"

Mike was quiet for a moment. His eyes seemed glued intently to where he continued to work on her neck. "I uh... yeah. I wasn't hurt, not exactly..."

Something in the way he said it felt oddly, and El got a strong sensation to not push the topic. "I'm glad you weren't hurt," she said

as she turned back around.

Mike was quiet for a moment, his hands a little stiffer than before. Finally, he cleared his throat.

"So um... Can I ask how you're from Hawkins? It's just... it's not a big town and I figure you and I are about the same age, right?"

El scrunched her face at his question, but something in her was a little more ready to tackle it than before. "Yeah, were both 25," she said elusively.

"How do you know how old I am?" Mike asked in surprise.

El snickered, "I met you on your birthday, remember?"

"Oh right! Okay then that makes even less sense. How come none of us remember you? Did you grow up in Hawkins?"

El's throat tightened. "I uh... never went to school in Hawkins."

"But you grew up there?" he persisted, "I remember you said you were homeschooled, right?"

El bit back the curse that materialized on her lips. She remembered telling him that now, but it had completely slipped her mind. Yet, as she tried to will herself to spin a lie, her mind wouldn't exactly let her. Lying to Mike felt... wrong. So instead, she danced around it.

"Uh... I guess I grew up near Hawkins. Not in. But yeah, homeschooled."

"Like in the country?" Mike asked. His hands moved to the edges of her shoulders and, with relief, her body released another massive store of tension.

"Yeah, in the country. You could say that," she said vaguely.

"But didn't you say you went to normal school for a bit at least?"

El mouthed '*fuck...*' at his question. Had she told him everything about her?!

"Um... yeah. I moved in with my Dad when I was around twelve and he eventually thought that I should go to Gas City for school. Smaller than Hawkins. Maybe easier to settle in. But -"

"But it's Gas City," Mike replied with an air of disgust.

El laughed. "Exactly. It's Gas City. That did not go well."

"Well, I wish you'd given Hawkins a try," Mike said casually, seeming to buy her story. "We could've been friends."

El smiled, something glowing in her at the thought. "Maybe we were in some alternate universe."

Mike laughed. "See! I told you there was a universe where I've known you since we were twelve. I knew it. Man, I'm missing out in this timeline."

El's smile felt warm in a way that made her grateful that he couldn't see her. In her wildest dreams she wouldn't have expected this conversation to go so easily. Yet, here they were chatting about their childhoods sitting on her bed while he rubbed her shoulders. It all seemed too easy, too good to be true. Before she knew it, he was telling little stories about his childhood in Hawkins with his friends. Their adventures. Their lack of social status. And suddenly, a topic that felt so nerve wracking began to feel easy, normal.

"What about you? What kind of friends did you have growing up?"

The question made El uncomfortable, but not in a way that made her unwilling to share. "Um... there weren't really any other kids around so most of the people I dealt with were adults. I um... had to keep to myself a lot."

Mike paused then, a hesitancy in his hands and in his voice. Something sad traced through his words. "Right, I forgot. You uh... told me that. So when you moved in with your Dad, that was better?"

El nodded, "So much better," she said. Something in her voice felt heavy. Unmasked. Mike's hands stilled upon her shoulders.

Another clap of thunder crashed through the air. El stiffened in

Mike's hands, but before she knew it he was tracing softly down her shoulders, grounding her and stemming off the tension that attempted to collect in her muscles.

"I'm sorry about this," El said quietly. "I really don't handle storms well."

"No, it's okay," Mike replied kindly. "I'm just surprised that there's something that scares you. You don't seem like you'd be afraid of anything."

"Oh," El replied with a dark laugh, "That's not true at all."

"No?"

El shook her head. "I'm afraid of some things so much that I refuse to talk about them."

The words hit the air hard, and she felt Mike's hands slow once again against her shoulders. She swallowed as a trace of nervousness fluttered up inside of her, shadows of those very fears itching at the edges like they did whenever they were brought up in thought. Of the moment... The call... Of how everything, in a single instant, could be taken away...

Mike repositioned himself. His arm came around the front of her shoulders.

"You have a knot right here," he said, lightly pushing his fingers into a sore spot near her shoulder blade. His hand around her cupped her arm in a full embrace and tentatively, he steadied her to his chest. "Is this okay?"

The sensation of his arm wrapped around her teased her to relax into him.

"Yes," she said.

"Tell me if this hurts too much," he said before he pressed harder at the base of her neck where she'd been tensing her shoulder. El's whole body went slack against him as an involuntary moan escaped her lips. He held her to him yet more firmly in reply. A warm comfort

washed over in that moment in her in the dim room, dizzying and serene. She found herself laying her head against his arm as he worked, the loveliness of his attention feeling thoughtful, calming, *safe*.

"El?"

"Yeah?"

His voice was low, hesitant, and right next to her ear. His hand continued to move against the pain point, a little more softly now.

"I uh... I just want you to know that we can move as slow as you want," he said after a moment, his voice soft and measured. "I'm fine with anything, really. Whatever you want. I just..." he paused and exhaled hard. El's heart tightened in reply. "I hope I didn't give the wrong impression."

"You didn't at all," El replied, something deep stirring in her at his words. She reached up and touched his hand on her shoulder. "I didn't handle it well. I'm sorry. I feel like I made a mess of our date."

Mike laughed then, his ribcage shaking against her shoulder in a way that made her smile, "Please, I've always wanted to wear a girl's clothes while stuck in her house during a torrential downpour. Dream come true. This is perfect."

El bit her lip in a vain attempt to stop her giggle. She shifted around to find him looking down on her in the dim lit room. His eyes fell on hers tentatively, but when they did they didn't look away.

She was struck in that moment by how easy it all was. Despite awkwardness, missteps, pumped brakes and so much confusion, he was still here, holding her gently, showing her care, respecting her wishes...

"You're very sweet," she found herself saying quietly.

Mike shrugged, "Easy to be with you, you're wonderful." And with that, Mike learned in close. He hovered for just the slightest second before dropping a soft kiss to her temple.

El's eyes slid shut and she shivered. Something big released within her with a simple breath.

For weeks she'd been on edge, hyper aware of every move Mike made in her direction, aware of the intensity within her when he neared, aware of every spark and surge that hiccupped her power like a loose wire.

But here, in the confines of her own personal space, leaned into him as he took care of her, it felt as though that tension had bled out from her straight out of her into his hands. In its place she felt a softness blooming, a simple surrender to the true feeling that had been rising in her since they'd met. And within that surrender, a sensation of warmth filled her. Yet, it was nothing like the lightning strike she was used to. Instead, it felt like a soft glow. All encompassing. Easy to hold. Heavy and light all at the same time.

"Are you feeling any better?" he asked when he pulled away from kissing her face.

"Yes," she said with surprise, her eyes wide upon his, her answer meaning so much more than just a headache.

A hopeful question filtered through her then, and she slowly, sought its answer. Her heart pattered with a softly yearning rhythm as she curiously, so curiously, leaned further back into him and, with a soft breath of hesitancy, kissed him.

Warmth filled her body in a heady rush, but the safety she was beginning to feel within Mike's embrace held back it's dangerous heights with a stunning ease.

Mike kissed her back so very slowly, allowing her to lead, and with time, El did so. Pulling herself around, her hands found his face. His arms encircled her as he leaned back into the headboard, taking her with him.

She relaxed into him with an astounding relief.

A quiet smile pulled to her lips as far off thunder rumbled in the distance.

"I'm really enjoying this date..." Mike whispered against her, his lips brushing hers with a smile before he kissed her again.

El nodded, feeling more free than she could remember. "Me too."

If you had told Mike that this was how his night would turn out while he was dashing soaked through a rainstorm, he wouldn't have believed you. Yet, he was here, all the same. Curled up with this beautiful girl as rain softly pattered the windows. A movie on a laptop and heads on pillows. His hand tentatively reaching for hers, and hers reaching back. Her toes digging into his shins as the night went on, her body breathing in a slow steady pace within his increasingly full embrace.

Dinner had consisted of take out, delivered by a man who was actually dressed for the rain and was given a large tip, and continued to a movie in bed. Sure, maybe it was all a little unorthodox for a first date, but Mike wasn't sure how he got so lucky. After such a horrendous beginning, it ended up being one of the nicest and most calming nights he'd had in months. It was simple, and almost eerily natural, to hold her like this while laying around in PJs.

Something about her felt different that night. It was as though her veneer had pulled away, revealing in full a woman he'd only gotten glimpses of before. Vulnerable and impulsive, with weaknesses and self doubt. Real. Yet, far from turn him away, it drew him to her all the more. He understood somehow, and after all she's done for him it felt like a gift to be able to give a little something back, even if it was as small as a back rub to alleviate a headache.

He found himself eternally curious about how this girl could find herself inexperienced at all of this at 25 years old, given that she was, well, absolutely gorgeous and amazing, but he didn't ask. Maybe if he was lucky it would be something that came up with time. And maybe it was a result of her childhood, her elusive stories and details leading him to have a dark pit of worry in his stomach that something truly wrong had occurred to her when she was young. Which, if it had, well... it sent a shiver of anger down his spine. How anyone could do anything bad to this person was simply beyond him.

Mike might have missed the end of the movie, his mind wandering and his attention attuned to the feeling of having her pulled against him. Yet, when the screen went still it caught his attention.

El didn't react, her breath slow and steady.

"Hey El, movie's over," he said softly into her ear.

"Mmhmm" she hummed. She shifted on the pillow and rolled slightly onto her back, bringing her face into view. Her eyes were closed and her lips were parted ever so slightly. Her face relaxed and serene. She had fallen asleep.

"El," Mike said hesitantly, "Wake up, I should go."

"mmmno," she breathed, her nose wrinkling in the most adorable way. She shifted around and buried her face into his chest. "Stay."

Mike's heart skipped at her sleep-laden murmur.

"You want me to... stay the night?" He asked in surprise.

El nodded against him, her arm coming up to wrap around his chest.

There wasn't a fiber in his body that was willing to fight against her request. He reached over her with his free arm and closed her laptop that sat on the nightstand.

Her breath moved softly against him, her chest rising and falling into his. Her hair, trying to escape her ponytail, fell upon her cheek. With a featherlight touch, he brushed it away. It was lost on him how he had gotten so lucky to be here, but he was not going to take it for granted.

The idea of moving at all seemed like a fool's errand, so he stayed put. The dim light from the desk on the other side of the room would have to stay on. As would the lights that were spilling through the doorway from all over the house.

He tried not to notice and instead pulled his focus to El. He dropped his head beside hers, happily inhaling her scent as he shut his eyes in an attempt to follow her to sleep.

Sleep never came that easy, though.

No matter how hard he tried, the lights felt like they were beaming through his eyelids. He probably laid there for twenty minutes, long after El had fallen fully asleep, trying to will his awareness of them away. But it was no use.

Finally, he made to move to turn them off, but El's arm tightened around him.

"I have to get the lights." he said quietly, but she persisted. It was odd. Her jaw was slack and her eyes were closed, but her grip upon his was firm, as though she possessed more power than made sense.

"...lights..." she murmured on a soft breath, almost incoherent.

And then, in one of the oddest things he'd ever seen in his life, her whole body twitched... and the room went to black.

Mike flinched in the fresh darkness, the lights in the entire house now out in the blink of an eye. No light was flooding through the door. No light was filling the room.

Yet, it couldn't have been a power surge... for the digital clock beside the bed still perfectly read the time.

Oops...

Thanks so much for taking a read. Just a few chapters left, and they're already hard at work. Would love to hear your thoughts in the comments below! Check my profile where you'll find TONS more Mileven, and find me on tumblr at el-borealis or instagram at el_borealis to connect!

8. Chapter 8

El awoke slowly. Dim light filtered through her eyelids, beckoning her to the day. She kept them closed, though. Instead, she breathed deep and adjusted her head, the cradle of it feeling just perfect.

Waking up felt different than it had in days. She felt... rested. Calm. Warm.

As if beckoned, the source of warmth moved.

Eyes snapping open, El was met with a sight that she had most definitely not been prepared for.

Mike, adjusting in his sleep.

It was his shoulder that she was resting on, his arm now apparent beneath her neck. His face was turned in her direction, so close, as he laid on his back. Curiously, she tried to recall falling asleep, but she failed. She could only guess that they had both passed out and he had accidentally stayed the night.

Not that she minded...

After a moment's hesitation, she pulled herself closer into him, burrowing her face deeper into the crook of his shoulder. Relief cascaded through her as she took in his scent, bringing her mind to their lovely night. It had been so oddly... easy. Silly almost, given how nervous she'd been to talk to him about everything that had been swirling through her mind. Despite hours, days, *weeks* of worry for how she could possibly traverse such a seemingly unwinnable situation, when push came to shove, Mike had somehow made it all so easy.

El laid there, eyes upon him, in the morning sun. The dim light from the window bathed him in a soft hue, and time allowed her the rare opportunity to study him unbidden. The freckles that dotted the bridge of his nose stood out in the light, telling a story that she couldn't quite read, much like the night sky that he had taught her about above. His dark hair was delightfully messy, falling over his

forehead and the pillow with no method to its madness. His lips were slightly parted, drawing breath, teeth marks indented just slightly on his bottom lip. His breath flowed across her cheek, brushing so soft, like a caress she had never felt before.

She couldn't hold back the smile that it all brought to her face. She could stay like this, looking at him, forever. Taking him in without all of the voices screaming conflicting instructions through her mind. She let her own breath fall into pattern with his and shifted herself even closer against his side. His arm replied, encircling her just a little bit tighter, despite the fact that he didn't seem to wake at all.

It was amazing what minds could do while being asleep...

She relished in the sensation of how light she felt lying in his arms. Such a different feeling than she'd felt mere hours before. It was as though Mike had lifted a weight from her chest during their talk, allowing her to breathe for the first time in weeks. He was so... good like that. Soft and kind. Intelligent and respectful. He listened. He never pushed. He gave. And with each of his actions he eased a door open inside of her. One that she so desperately wanted to walk through. One that very possibly offered her a new level of delicious normalcy for the very first time. It was so simple in concept, but it had always felt so far away. Yet here she was, in this moment, living it. Even if just for a moment. Existing in the space that lucky normal people could find themselves, lying in bed on a quiet morning with a gorgeous guy who accepted her, respected her, and gave her the space that she requested... Though right now she didn't want any space at all.

She felt... safe.

Her breath hitched against the realization, her eyes prickling with the softest hint of tears. *Safe*. It was not a feeling that she knew all that well. It was fleeting and could not be depended upon. But she couldn't deny that she felt it here, within Mike's arms, in these first moments of the day.

It made her mind run with possibilities. Of more open doors and more ease. Of futures. Of truths laid bare at his feet...

Okay, now *that* was maybe *too* crazy of an idea.

Like a little slap of whiplash against her heart, her chest tightened at the thought. She felt the barrier within her. The one that held back every secret truth about her. It was out of the question. It was impossible. Not just for her safety, but for his.

Still, for the faintest second, it all felt so very heavy upon her lips.

Her eyes softened on his face, though, still grateful for the little bit that she could have. Because here, in the hazy light of morning, she could at least lie to herself a little bit. With his arm beneath her, holding her gently, his chest rising and falling in a patterned rhythm that felt so right? She could almost forget that there was so much that she couldn't say, so much of herself that she couldn't share.

She wished that she could just pause time and stay in this bed, with this lovely sleeping man, for a little while longer, maybe just a little bit, maybe forever...

Alas, that was one power that she did not possess.

Mike twitched. His face contorted the slightest bit as his eyes began to move beneath their lids. He worried his lip for the softest moment before he shifted, rolling toward her fully. His arm tightened around her back as his eyes opened directly onto hers.

"Oh!" he exclaimed with a low voice as he found her looking at him, "Hi..."

"Hi," she purred quietly, unable to wipe the smile from her lips, "I think we fell asleep."

"You fell asleep," he replied blearily. He reached up to rub his eye, "You uh... you asked me to stay?"

"I did?"

He looked back at her then, his eyes widening with worry. "Yeah... you told me to. Should I have... should I have left?"

"No!" El exclaimed softly, her hand reaching to fall upon his chest.

"No, I'm... I'm happy you stayed."

Mike looked at her for a moment, his eyes adjusting to the light, before his lips quirked up into a smile. "Okay, good. Because you kind of held me to the bed when I tried to leave."

"I did?" She gasped lightly.

"Yeah."

El's eyes widened, her heart picking up speed, "I... I'm so sorry."

Mike chuckled. His hand gave her back a comforting caress. "It's okay. I'm not complaining."

"Oh," she breathed. "Okay,"

His eyes were so gorgeous in this light. Dark and sparkling, still so soft as he continued to wake up. She wanted to kiss him. Badly. It would be so so easy. Eyes fluttering shut, she -

"- Oh, hey," he said with a thread of worry. His other hand came to her cheek, brushing her almost imperceptibly. "You uh... I think you had a nosebleed."

El cringed as her eyes popped back open. She reached up to her nose. Sure enough, she was met with a tiny patch of dried blood directly below her nostril. Turning just the slightest bit pink, she begrudgingly pulled herself from his side and out of the bed.

"Thanks, I'll um... just a second."

El got to her feet, a bit light headed from the speed with which she'd bolted from the bed, and made her way to the bathroom. The mirror reflected a dark red that stood out against her pale skin. It appeared like a mark, a reminder, that all wasn't just simply resolved.

She pulled one of her black washcloths from the back of the cupboard and swiped beneath her nose with cold water, a habit that she knew like the back of her hand. She took the opportunity to quickly brush her teeth while she was at it, all while trying to put out of her mind what the dollop of blood could mean.

When she hurried back into her room, fresh faced and more awake than she wanted to be, she stopped short in the doorway. Mike looked up in surprise from where he was hunched over, sitting at the edge of her bed, with her *clock* in his hands. His eyes were wide, odd, almost like he'd been caught doing something.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Oh! Yeah," he said quickly, putting the clock down in a clumsy fashion. "I uh- I just- I was thinking of getting one just like this? Do-Do you like it?"

She looked at him curiously. "I guess? It's a clock. It does it's job?"

Mike laughed, almost nervously. "Right yeah, sorry, I mean like," he turned his attention back to the clock, his hand running down the cord that plugged into the wall. "Does it have a battery backup or anything? You know, if the power goes out? I like having that-um-that backup? You know, just in case."

"I don't think so?" she replied, almost chuckling. The question just seemed so delightfully odd.

"Hmm, okay," he said slowly, his attention back on the clock, "Uh... Thanks..."

It was then that El noticed the actual *time* on the clock. With it, reality wedged itself into her morning one step further.

She sighed. "I have to get ready for work," she said, She once again noticed the sun pouring in through the windows. "I think we might actually be able to dive for the first time this week."

Mike stood up from her bed, his makeshift sleeping clothes on full display that she'd almost forgotten about. Too short pants and too big shirt. "Right, sure. I'll just... uh... can I change in your bathroom?"

"Yeah!" she replied, "I'll change in here."

Mike was out of her room quickly, closing the door behind him a little too hard.

She found herself staring at the door with a small sense of bemusement. He'd just woken up, she reminded herself. Maybe that was just what he was like in the first minutes of the day? Confused? Befuddled? Fascinated by the inner workings of a clock?

She chuckled to herself as she quickly changed into her work clothes, forgoing a shower for the day due to the circumstances. Grabbing a brush from her desk, she pulled it through her hair and redid her messy ponytail until it resembled something akin to professional. Then, she stepped out into the main room, almost at the same time as Mike.

It was then that she got her first chance to see what he had actually attempted to look like for their date the night before, now that his clothes had been dried. He wore a thin forest green sweater, pushed up at the elbows. It contrasted so nicely with a pair of dark jeans that were cut trim and fit... very well. In the few moments he'd been in the bathroom he'd seemed to just ever so slightly tame his hair, it was still a rakish mess, but now it fell in the correct directions. His glasses had found their way back on his face.

He looked... excellent.

"So uh..." he started, his eyes still oddly shifty. He leaned against her wall, his fingers finding their way to the light switch for the living room in what seemed like a nervous twitch. "You work today?"

"Yeah?" she replied, almost wanting to laugh at his continued demeanor. "Do you?"

"No, I uh... I mean I have to prep for a summer session I'm going to start teaching next week, but just, you know, working from home." he replied.

"Oh, that's cool. What are you teaching?"

"It's a thermodynamics lab. Lots of simulated experiments and stuff," He replied. His attention was aloof, not on his words. His eyes darted up to the ceiling as his fingers attempted the light switch. The light turned on. Then off.

She looked at him curiously. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah!" he replied in a high pitch as he quickly retracted his arm back from the switch. He shook his head. It was then that she had to accept that something tight was definitely in his eyes. It had been there since he'd awoken. It made her stomach nervous. Not good nervous. Quite the opposite.

"You sure?" she asked slowly, almost cursing herself as she heard her voice waver.

He didn't reply for a second. Instead, his eyes were focused hard on her. It was disarming. Unsettling. Then, with another shake of his head, it was like he fell out of a trance. "Yeah!" he replied, "Yeah, sorry. Am I acting... weird? I'm acting weird," He shook his head again. "Sorry, I didn't sleep well, I guess..."

"Oh!" El replied, relieved to have an answer. "Was it the bed? Or did I - "

"No, it's not you. I just - it happens sometimes."

"Okay... Well, I should probably..." she pointed to the door.

"Yeah! Yeah, let's go."

El put her backpack on her shoulder and led the way to the door, Mike falling in behind her. She went out first, allowing him through before she locked the door.

She turned back to him on the front step to find him with his hands pushed deeply into his pockets. He didn't seem to notice she'd turned around, instead his attention whipped almost immediately from his feet to her still broken front porch light.

"Where are you parked?" she asked.

"Oh I -" Mike grimaced, abandoning his attention on her porch light almost immediately. "I don't drive. Remember? I'm uh... I was just going to walk."

"Oh!" she gasped, guilt cascading through her, "You... you got stuck

in the storm last night because you *walked* through it?"

"Yes?"

"Why didn't you remind me? I could've picked you up!"

"No, really it's okay. I like walking," he said, his cheeks turning the slightest pink.

"Well, let me take you home at least," she offered.

"Are you sure? Will it make you late?."

"Only a couple minutes, it'll be fine."

Mike smiled sheepishly, "Okay, then. Thanks."

She led the way to her car in the small driveway and started it up. Mike crawled into the passenger seat, adjusting everything on account of his height, and quickly fastened his seatbelt.

"I live right off of Elmhurst. Do you know where that is?"

"Yep," she said almost too cheerily. "It's on my way to work."

She pulled from the driveway and tried to fight off the odd sensation of tension that seemed to surround him, and in doing so she let her first thought fall from her lips.

"So, do you not drive because of that car accident?" she asked as she turned onto the main road.

"Um..." Mike's voice hitched up, as though he was surprised by the topic. El winced, realizing that it was truly *not* the best subject choice if her goal had been lighthearted banter.

"I - yeah. That's why," he was quiet for a moment.

"Sorry I brought it up. If it's - "

"-No," Mike said, interrupting her. "It's a good question. It's not like I lost my license or anything like that. I just... well, driving is just, it's the opposite of enjoyable, I guess."

"How long ago was it?" She asked, her voice going soft.

"A few years."

"Hm," El hummed thoughtfully. "Have you ever thought about picking it up again? I mean, walking is nice but it must take up a lot of extra time."

"Yeah, I uh..." Mike fell quiet again. She looked over as she stopped at a light. He looked tense, as though he was debating what to say next. "I tried last weekend, actually," he said, blurting it out fast, almost as though he had to push himself to say it. "I uh... yeah, it still gives me panic attacks."

"Oh..." she replied. "I'm sorry."

Mike looked oddly miserable as he sat there at the red light, staring straight out the front window, stock still, eyes wide and tight. It was so similar to the very first day that she had met him, a fear rising within him that he hadn't been prepared for. She didn't even think as she reached for his hand. Slipping her hand beneath his on his leg, she said, "I get it. I've got stuff like that. Things that just drop into my brain at the worst times. Triggers and stuff."

"Yeah..." he replied, looking over at her, almost curiously. After a few seconds his hand relaxed in hers. Her arm tingled delightfully as he interlaced his fingers within hers. When he spoke again, his voice was a little easier, "I thought I'd give it a try what with everything, you know," he offered, "Because of the skydiving and stuff. It went well for a minute but it just ended up getting really bad again after a while and I kind of froze. Which is something you *really* don't want to do when you're driving."

"Yeah, no I get it," she said with a reassuring smile. "That's kind of the worst part about being afraid of something. You have to just do the thing that scares you over and over and over again. Every time it gets a little less scary, but in the beginning it's terrifying."

"Yeah..." he replied thoughtfully. He was quiet for a moment. His thumb rubbed across the top of her hand in the silence. When he spoke again, his tone was hesitant, "What are you afraid of, other

than storms?"

She probably deserved it after asking him a such prying question, but it didn't make her any more comfortable to have it posed. She knew the answer, of course. She knew the fear that loomed, ever-present, at the back of her mind. A fear that could take away this moment, along with every future moment, of her freedom. One bad move leading the wrong people to her doorstep. A future that matched her past...

"I'm afraid of losing everything?" she said, surprising herself with her honesty. "Like, in just one moment it'll all get taken away."

Mike was quiet, but his hand squeezed hers. She found herself squeezing back as her heart grew heavy.

"That's not going to happen," he said with a surety that could only be borne from ignorance. She smiled nonetheless. It was a nice thought to believe.

"Maybe you're right," she said.

And maybe he was. It had been five years since there had been a single trace of anyone on her tail. Maybe, just maybe, he was right.

"Oh, take the next left."

El followed his instructions and about two blocks later she pulled up in front of a house that Mike pointed to.

Mike took a deep breath as she put on the brakes. He turned to her with an abruptness that she hadn't been expecting. He looked at her with a deep expression of remorse. "I'm sorry I've been acting weird this morning," he said, shaking his head. "I uh.. I had a really amazing night with you, El."

El felt herself blush as she turned to face him fully, a thread of relief settling over her. "So did I," she replied.

Mike smiled, a bit of calm filtering into his gaze, "Good." He leaned in then, quickly, and caught her lips.

It had taken her all morning to find her way back to this place, the

exact place where she wanted to be, with his hand upon her cheek and his lips upon hers.

It was worth the wait.

"Can I - see you again? This weekend, maybe?" El asked as she pulled away.

"Yeah!" He replied instantly. His eyes danced a bit as he smiled. "When's good for you?"

"Tomorrow night, maybe?" she asked, hoping that she wasn't coming off too forward.

"Then tomorrow night it is," he replied, his fingers toying with hers. "Maybe we can actually go out and do something this time. Though, I can't deny that takeout and Netflix probably can't be beat."

El couldn't contain her smile. "That would be difficult."

Mike chuckled, "Saturday, then." He looked back up to her, his expression calmer than it had been all morning, "And really, sorry for being weird this morning."

"It's fine," she replied. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," he said with a reassuring nod, "I just got stuck in my brain. Better now, though."

"Good," she said softly.

"So, I'll uh, see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

With that, he kissed her again. This time with more weight. The same heady buzz coursed through her as it always did, so delightful and so intense. Yet, she was pleasantly surprised to find it manageable once again. It no longer tried to escape her, the sensations too overwhelming for her to contain. Instead, it filled her with a sense of something so good that she didn't even have a name for it.

"Sorry, I'm keeping you from work," he said with a laugh against her lips.

"Don't apologize for that," she replied, "This is way better." She pressed her lips against his once again. "I should go, though."

"Right, yes. I'll um... I'll stop kissing you and let you get on with your life."

El laughed as he pulled away and unbuckled his seatbelt... only to reveal that they hadn't exactly been alone.

"Well, looks like I don't need to call that Lyft, after all!" Max said loudly as she made a few taps on her phone. She looked at them with a dramatic smirk, her voice still raised. "I can ride with El here! Since she's dropping off Mike! At 8:30 in the morning!"

El grimaced as Max stared at them through the car window, bent over with a highly amused grin on her face. Max stalked up before El or Mike could really react and opened the passenger door. "Trade out, Mikey. We're gonna be late for work."

Mike sputtered, his hand leaving hers as he looked at El in surprise, "I'll uh, see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah," she replied, rolling her eyes at the ridiculousness of the moment, her face continuing to turn red. "Bye."

"Bye."

"Scoot scoot," Max added, hurrying Mike out of the way to get in the car. "Bye!" she called over her shoulder as she took the seat and shut the door. Her expression was teasing and oh so highly amused. "El Hopper! *What* do we have here? Late to work AND having a boy stay the night?"

El sighed as she put the car in drive and pulled away from the curb, "We're only going to be a couple of minutes late."

"You're avoiding the second part of my observation."

El bit back a smirk, "Maybe."

At that, Max turned abruptly and playfully tapped El on the shoulder. "What happened?! I need to know!"

El shrugged, "We just... we were watching a movie and we fell asleep. Nothing really happened. Not really."

"Did you talk to him?"

El bit her lip, "Yeah."

"And did he reply with - " Max tossed her hair dramatically, "Oh, El. Whatever you need, however slow you want to take this, that's fine! I just really want to spend all the time I can with you forever and always because I think you're perfect in every way and I'm totally obsessed with you."

El hid her face and giggled as she turned a corner. "Not exactly."

"But pretty much?"

"Maybe a little bit," she conceded. "Not that dramatically, though."

"I TOLD YOU!" Max exclaimed, poking El in the side. "Did you have a good time?"

"I had... the best time," El replied, not even able to hide her expression.

Max squealed, "Oh my God, you're the cutest thing in the world when you're in love with that weirdo. It's adorable."

"I'm not in LOVE with him."

"Yeah, sure okay, right," Max replied. "But you're close. That face your making definitely has love written all over it."

"Shut up." El whined.

"Shut up because I'm right?"

"Shut up because you're the most annoying person I know!"

"How dare you, I'm your best friend. I just want you to be happy and

you *look* so frickin happy, so just let me enjoy this."

"You know, you really don't have room to talk," El retorted. "What is this? The third night this week you've stayed the night with Lucas?"

"I'm not keeping count," Max said elusively, "but thanks for having Mike out of the house, by the way. His room shares a wall with Lucas's so that meant we didn't have to pay any attention to how loud we were."

"Oh my God, Max!" El cringed.

"Just saying! So, you're seeing him tomorrow night, huh?"

"Did you listen to our entire conversation?" El scoffed.

"Just the end. Have plans?"

"Not yet."

"Well, you do now," she said matter-of-factly, "You're double dating with me and Lucas."

"Oh, we are, huh?" El replied with amusement.

Max sighed, "Lucas has this thing he really wants to go to at some nerdy science place? El, I really like him but God that's going to be boring."

"Oh you *do* like Lucas, *a lot*" El teased, "You don't go anywhere unless you want to. Let alone to 'nerdy science places'."

"Don't rub it in. I'm trying to keep it cool," Max conceded. El could sense the slightest hint of blush breaking through her friends tough exterior. "Will you come?"

"It does sound like something Mike would like," El offered, "I'll ask him."

"Great," Max replied with a true sigh of relief.

"But I'm letting Lucas know that you would usually never say yes to

this type of thing so he knows how much you like him," El added with a smirk.

Max gasped, "You wouldn't."

El laughed in reply, her smile delightfully large, her morning feeling so very perfect. "Maybe I wouldn't. And maybe I would."

What kind of epic self sabotage was this?

Mike shook his head, almost hoping that he could shake off his feeling like a dog shook off water. His lips still tingled from where he'd kissed her and his hand was still clenched in the shape of hers from where she'd taken it in the car. The truth was that he had just spent the night with a girl for the first time in as long as he could remember. More than that, waking up beside El had just felt, for the first few hazy seconds, like exactly where he belonged. God, she looked so beautiful with the sun's rays falling upon her cheek, hair splayed out lazily across the pillow, soft sleepy smile in his direction.

Mike opened the door to his house and closed his eyes as he shut it, letting himself take a moment in quiet. He tried to focus on how it felt to touch her skin, on how her hair had tickled his cheek to wake him up, on the deep amber hue of her eyes and how they searched his so curiously before she softened and she kissed him in the bed as the storm continued through the evening, on *how* she kissed him, slow and deliberate, as though she was testing waters that might be too cold, only to relax into him, allowing them both to let time pass by unbidden in the dim sanctuary of her bedroom.

Mike sighed contentedly. The memory served well to chase away the preposterous thoughts that were still, after an almost sleepless night, racing through his mind. Thoughts that had nothing to do with how it felt to be near her, or with how he felt his heart softening in a way that he didn't even know how to breathe through. Nothing to do with her at all.

Or did they?

"This is ridiculous," he muttered in frustration as his brain chimed

back it's damning question.

Mike was a man of science! He had a degree on his wall and another in the works! He *knew* how electricity worked! He also knew how it did NOT work. And it *did not work* through control of the human brain, no matter how amazing and mind blowing that sounded, and no matter how amazing and mind blowing that person was.

Even if it was El.

Honestly, he was almost impressed. The lengths that his mind would go to stop him from fucking enjoying his life were absolutely outstanding. It wasn't taking this from him, though, not this time. He wasn't going to lose himself in an unending quest for answers. He was going to enjoy his morning, even if it killed him. He was going to rest. He was going to put on some coffee and make a nice breakfast. He was going to take a long shower.

He was going to simply allow himself some *time* to actually *enjoy* that *something* in his life was going really *really* well.

And that's what he did.

He was proud of himself. For the remaining glorious hours of the morning he put it from his mind. He didn't think about how she had twitched and how the lights had seemed to react. He didn't think about the still blown out bulbs at her front door, and how they had shattered when she'd almost kissed him. He didn't think about how she had breathed his name in a gasp as the air filled with screeches and a nearby building erupted into an electrical fire.

He didn't think about it because he'd thought about it all goddamn night, the pattern weaving itself in a way that seemed so ridiculous and reaching and *stupid*. A pattern that was likely etched into her ceiling from how long he'd laid there, eyes blown wide, staring up as his mind ran a marathon in the dark.

Every time he found his mind edging back there he thought about *her* instead. He thought about the warm sensation that was continuing to grow within him whenever he was with her, a feeling that made it seem like everything was okay, even if everything had gone wrong.

He thought of the way that she had just *grabbed* him in her living room, kissing him with a sense of *want* that he could only have dreamed of. He thought about the way she reached for his hand with such kindness as he stumbled through her questions in the car, a kindness that had served to ground him enough so that he could easily admit to her, and to himself, the source of his bad week. Mostly, he thought with awe about the look in her eyes whenever he caught her gaze; a look that made him feel oddly certain that he was not alone in how he felt about whatever was happening between them. Because whatever was happening between them? It felt magical. Heavy in the best way. Pulling at parts of him that he'd forgotten existed.

He thought about her so much that it was as though he had conjured her when his phone buzzed around lunch time.

Heart jumping, he pulled it out to find the name he wanted to see.

El: Hi :) about tomorrow night. Max wanted to know if we wanted to go with her and Lucas to some 'nerdy science thing' at some 'science place' (her words not mine). Want to go?

Mike snickered, his fingers typing fast.

Sure! Do you know any details? Or should I ask Lucas?

Her reply was immediate -

That'd be great! I don't think Max knows anything.

Mike smiled, the idea that he'd see her the next day serving to buoy him further. After texting Lucas for the information and finding out tickets needed to be bought, Mike made his way back to his room to make the purchase.

He eased his laptop open and smirked. A photo of scientists from a grainy news clipping stared back at him, the supposed 'villains' of the Hawkins National Laboratory that he'd read about a couple nights back.

He snickered as his eyes skimmed across the text in an effort to close the window, but his laugh died on his lips...

"...Chronic nosebleeds..."

Something deep in his gut stalled like a broken record, heavy and unyielding. He gulped as his eyes froze upon the q&a interview with a supposed subject called only '008'. He'd hardly paid attention to it the other night...

"Do you have any side effects from your time in the lab?"

"You mean other than the PTSD? A few. The powers I have don't cause problems if used minimally, but I grow fatigued and sick if I use them too much. I can be physically weak for days and I get chronic nosebleeds. I can't go to a doctor to find out if it's causing damage, too dangerous, so I just have to live with it."

"Tell me about life within the lab? What did they do with you when they weren't testing on you?"

"I was left in my room alone most hours of the day. It was basically like a jail. They did send people in to teach me necessary things I needed to know, for experiments and tests. That was why I was taught to read, to count, and just some basic knowledge and history about the world. So I could conjure those visuals for people when they made me. But other than that, I was kept in a room alone."

"Alone? We've heard reports of multiple children. Were you not aware of them?"

"We were mostly isolated from the other children. At least I was, most of the years. I heard whispers that there were other kids there but I never saw any except one."

"Tell us about that child."

"She was a baby. Can you believe that? I don't know where they got her or how but they were testing on a baby, the fucking bastards. I think back and it still makes me ill. I was at least 4 or 5 when I was taken, but a baby? That girl didn't know anything outside of that world."

"Do you remember anything about her? Her skills? Did she have any at that time?"

"I know she'd already received her identification marker. Imagine tattooing a baby. Disgusting. She was marked with 011. Eleven. That was all I knew her as. She was four when I escaped, so I don't remember much and I don't know how much she could do. The only thing I ever saw was that when she had temper tantrums in our room, you know, because she was a baby, it affected the lights in the room."

"The lights?"

"Yeah, they would flicker or pulse. One time she started wailing and the lightbulbs just popped. Glass just rained down on us from the ceiling. They had to move our room because she'd burnt out the sockets..."

Mike wasn't sure how long he sat there, frozen in place. He wasn't sure if he'd stopped breathing or if the room had chilled to ice. He wasn't sure how his heart could beat so fast for so long, or if his hands would work from how much they were sweating. He just knew that his eyes felt raw when he finally blinked, the words seared into his retinas so much that he could see them behind his eyelids.

Glass rained down... burnt out the sockets... chronic nosebleeds... Eleven... the lights...kept in a room alone... weak for days... like a jail... chronic nosebleeds... chronic nosebleeds... El- Eleven... the lights... the lights... the lights...

"This is crazy this is crazy... this is crazy..." Mike breathed through a jittering jaw, but that didn't stop him as his body seemed to lurch and his fingers dropped hard on the keys. He struggled to get the words out, but finally his shaking hands input 'Hawkins National Laboratory' back into the search bar. With a laser-like intensity he leaped down the rabbit hole.

It seemed so absolutely insane. So far fetched and ridiculous, but that didn't stop him. Quite the opposite actually. He burned through tabloids, conspiracy sites, newspaper articles and everything he could find. It was about thirty minutes in that his eyes blew wide open and his breath officially caught in his chest.

A police report, only two lines long, from about 12 years back, detailing that Chief James Hopper had visited the laboratory.

He could almost feel El's shirt he'd slept in on his chest once again, *Hawkins PD* emblazoned upon the cotton.

Mike looked at the date with a gaping jaw, shook his head frantically, and dashed out of his bedroom.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he'd heard the living room ignite with chatter at some point in the recent past. It must have been mid-afternoon. Dustin and Will had gotten home and video games were echoing through the house. He moved in a rushed trance as he entered the living room and stopped short. Will and Dustin looked up in surprise.

"Hey...?" Dustin said hesitantly as he pressed paused on the videogame. He looked Mike up and down. "No offense, but you look like shit."

"I didn't get much sleep last night," he replied, his voice flat. Hoarse.

"Didn't you have a date?" Will asked with a smirk.

"Yes."

"Oooh! Didn't get much sleep huh?" Dustin teased, "Pray tell, why would *that be?*"

"I don't have time for your bullshit, Dustin," Mike snapped. "Will, I need to talk to your mom."

"Okay, that is NOT the thing to say when you're asked about not getting sleep on a date," Dustin retorted with surprise.

"Why my mom?" Will asked, almost wary.

"It's..." Mike sighed, "It's about the lights."

"That again?" Will said with a sigh, "Mike, I'm telling you. It's just a theory my Mom has."

"Well, I think she might be onto something, so I want - I *need* - to talk to her."

Will regarded Mike for a long moment, but Mike did not waver. Finally, he shrugged, pulled out his phone and dialed. "Hi Mom. No, I'm fine. Mike wants to you talk to you, actually. About... the light explosion? Yeah, I don't know. He's... here, just talk to him."

Mike mouthed a big silent '*thank you*' to Will as he snatched the phone from his grasp. "Hi. Mrs. Byers?"

"How many times do I have to tell you Mike, please call me Joyce," she replied kindly on the other side of the line, "So, you've got me curious. What do you want to know?"

Mike looked at the boys and, making a split second decision, took the phone back to his room and shut the door. He kept his voice low as he continued. "You mentioned that you went to the police after that night, right? Do you remember if you talked to Chief James Hopper?"

At that, she scoffed. Loud. "Of course I talked to Jim, and he blew me off. Hard. Multiple times."

"You asked him about the lab?" Mike asked, his voice beginning to sound desperate.

"I did...Mike, what is this about?"

"I just..." he thought quickly on his feet. "I think the same thing is going on here, or something really similar. If he maybe knows something then... maybe I want to talk to him?"

"Why do you think he would know anything?" She asked darkly.

"Because I've now found two police reports that state he visited the laboratory a couple years before it was closed. Do you remember what month this happened at your house, by any chance?"

"Oh, of course," she replied easily, "I've got a whole folder on it. Here, give me just a minute. I'll pull it out." Mike felt his hand shaking as shuffling crackled through on the other side of the line. Finally, after a crinkle of papers, Mrs. Byers continued, "The electrician's receipt is from November that year. The 9th. I think they came by three days after it happened, maybe?"

Mike looked down at the computer screen at the second of two police reports on the screen, dated November 5th.

"Yeah, I think he knows something," Mike said heavily, his stomach turning to lead. "How exactly did he push you off?"

At that, she fell quiet.

"Mrs. Byers? You there?"

"I don't know if I should be talking about that," she said hesitantly.

"What do you mean?"

"Mike," she asked, her voice serious. "Are people unsafe?"

Mike could only think of El.

"I think so, maybe."

At that, she took a deep breath. "Okay, well... Will didn't know about him so please don't mention this, but... we had been seeing each other."

"You and Chief Hopper?" he asked, his eyes bulging.

"Yes, not for long but I thought maybe it was, you know, going somewhere. But then," her voice layered harsh once again, "when I went to get his help with the lights and I told him my theory he..." she huffed, "he told me that I was being delusional and that he didn't want to continue seeing me."

"Whoa."

"Yeah... so, when I say that police blew me off, *that* is what I mean."

Mike's stomach tightened another notch. "What do you... know about him?"

"Oh, I don't know much anymore," she said, "Still the Chief of Police. Divorced a long time ago. Daughter died when she was really young. Cancer."

Mike's eyebrow curled up in surprise. "His daughter... died?"

"Oh yeah," she said, "Years before this happened, though."

Mike's chest began to release, his breath coming easier, he almost laughed as she continued. This was crazy. He was being crazy. This was -

"- And oh, I think I heard he adopted a foster kid at some point, but that was years after we stopped talking - "

The release stopped, ice returning even thicker to his veins.

"Foster kid?" He stuttered. "Do you know if it was a girl? Or-or a boy?"

"Really, I don't know much, hun," Mrs. Byers said apologetically. Then, with more hesitancy, she asked, "Why do you think that people are unsafe, Mike? Are you alright? The boys? Are you all safe? "

"Yeah! Oh yeah," Mike spurted emphatically, his energy spiking as his breath continued to tighten. "It's just. I've seen a couple things. Not just what happened at that bar. And I think whatever happened at your house is - is happening here. And it's, whatever it is, its unsafe. So, I'm just trying to get all of the information I can so I can figure out what's going on because it's -"

"- driving you crazy?"

"Yes," he said empathically.

Mrs. Byers laughed, "Mike, honey. I get that. OH!"

"What?" Mike barked.

"I just... wow, how did I forget this?!" She exclaimed. "Wow, time flies. The city has a ten year moratorium on police and city records and the like. I always meant to go find out what I could when the records became available but I didn't realize how much time had passed! Listen, how would you like it if I went down to public records and did a little digging?"

"You can... do that?" he asked.

"Yeah! I know Barry who runs the place. I'll give you a ring if I find anything?"

"Okay? Sure. Thank you."

"Call you in a bit, then."

"Do you have my number?"

"Sweetie, you've been my son's best friend for twenty years. I have you on speed dial just in case," she said with a laugh, "It's a mom thing. Oh, and can you hand me back to Will? I have to..."

Mike didn't hear the rest of what Mrs. Byers said as he said a quick yes and barreled out of his room to hand the phone back to Will. He returned to his room without another word, and laid straight down, his eyes stitched to the ceiling.

He'd been hoping that Mrs. Byers would poke a hole in his hypothesis but... too much lined up. The connecting points were too direct for him to dismiss them. But one thing out of all of it surprised him. It stirred his stomach and made him shake. It wasn't the science behind this possibility that was causing him to feel ill. It wasn't the implications it could have on his studies, on physics, and *science* as a whole.

It was El.

If his absolutely INSANE theory was right... if El had been tested on at this... this place... and if, as a result, she had spurts of some kind of... energy expulsion... then that meant that they happened suddenly, inconsistently, followed by nosebleeds and migraines and...

What if she couldn't control it?

What if she was hurting herself? Her body? Her *brain*?

What if... what if she didn't even *know*?

That was when it clicked. In the blink of an eye, all of his doubt flew

from the window.

El, without knowledge or control over something so powerful... could be killed.

Mike bolted up from his bed and back to his desk. He grabbed his notebooks and leafed them open. Weeks of deadend attempts at figuring out the lights, *and the insane spikes up during the skydives* **holy shit**, stared back at him.

His hands began to move a pencil fast, rethinking all of it with his new possible hypothesis at the center. And he didn't know for sure if he was right, but he did know one thing.

If he was right... he could help her.

And if he was right? He *had to help her*. To understand it. To harness it. To control it. They could do tests, figure out what was happening and how, and in that he could help her. He could maybe even keep her safe.

But before he took any further steps, he needed more evidence...

He wasn't sure how long it was, thirty minutes or three hours, but it was like he snapped out of a trance when his phone rang.

"Hi, dear," Mrs. Byers said on the other line. "I looked through everything they had and... there was nothing."

"Nothing?" He chimed back desperately

"Honestly, it was weird. It seemed like things were missing? Wouldn't you think that there'd be information about what happened at that.. at that place? After all these years?"

"The files were just... empty?"

"Almost."

"Okay, well, thanks for looking," Mike said, discouraged. He thought fast, "Hey, if I texted you pictures of the light sockets I was talking about, would you be able to tell me if it looks like the same thing you

saw?"

"Of course."

Without missing a beat, Mike jumped up and darted out of his bedroom door.

El was just wrapping up for the day, cataloging gear after a final tourist dive when her phone rang. She fished it out of her bag and was surprised to see her dad's number.

"Hi?" she said into the receiver.

"Hey, kid," he said. Her chest tightened as she heard the gruffness in his voice. "Any interest in coming home for dinner tonight?"

"I was just there day before yesterday..." she replied, befuddled.

"And I can't see my daughter two nights in a week?"

"I - what - "

"El, come home for dinner," He stated clearly. His voice was heavy, heavy in a way he only used if...

El's blood turned to ice.

"I'll be there in an hour."

Both of them hung up at that, no pleasantries shared at all.

"Hey, wanna go to Thelma's?" Max asked as she walked into the storeroom. "It's 2-for-1 wings tonight."

"I can't..." El replied curtly as she turned to pick up her bag, "I have to go to my Dad's." She crossed almost immediately to the door before she stopped and turned back to her friend. "I'm sorry, can you... can you find another ride home?"

Max looked at her curiously. "Is everything okay?"

"I..." she swallowed her real answer, "I think so. I just have to go."

"I'll find a ride," Max replied quizzically. "Goodnight?"

"Night!" El called back, already out the door.

The drive toward Hawkins felt like forever and a day. She could hardly contain her speeding. She wished she'd asked more questions on the phone, though she knew he wouldn't have answered anything over a phone line with the fact that anything, anytime, could be bugged.

But, wow, it had been so long... There hadn't been a peep in years. And still, just like that, in a split second, the fear that always itched at the edges of her mind found a reason for its existence.

What if they'd actually found her this time? She'd been so careless lately. Something could have gotten back to... to someone. She shivered anew at what had occurred at Thelma's, the backroom exploded like a love letter to her powers, there in public for all to see.

She drove faster until the curves of the backroad to her dad's house appeared, too dangerous to speed. She went as fast as she could, though, and she was in her dad's driveway in under an hour.

"You were fast," her dad called from the kitchen as she bounded through the door.

She didn't answer, she just looked at him, eyes wide and terrorized.

"Okay, it's not that bad. Take a breath. At least I don't think it is," he said, holding up his hands. "Someone looked at the files."

"The files?" She asked, confused.

"At the public records office."

"How do you know?" She replied, her voice clipped and tight. "Who was it?"

At that, he grimaced. "I have some files flagged. The real ones and then some red herrings. Barry's supposed to call me if any of them get pulled."

"And they pulled the... the real ones?"

"Just the ones about that night. About that lab."

"Who was it?" she asked emphatically.

"He... doesn't know," Hopper spat with abject annoyance, "He was out to lunch when it happened and his assistant just said 'a woman who said she was a friend of Barry's' came in."

El looked at him with a dropped jaw. "Didn't... there was no... like, check in?"

"Oh, there is," he said, his anger flaring. "She didn't use it."

"Is there a surveillance - "

"- wasn't running."

"What?!" She yelped.

"El, calm down." Hopper walked toward her carefully. "It could be nothing. It could be a kid's school project for all I know. All I know is that no one has ever pulled these files since they became available a few years back. So, we have to stay alert."

"What did the files say?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. They said nothing," Hopper said, shaking his head, "I've completely redacted them. Can't not have them there, though."

"Is that... legal?"

"Oh, it's highly illegal," he replied with a smirk, "But then again, harboring a superpowered child fugitive is also illegal so I think I became a crooked cop a long time ago."

At that, a little bit of the panicked fire in El's chest extinguished. "It could be nothing." She repeated.

"It could be nothing. It could be something," her dad sighed, "Listen, I

didn't want to call you home like this when it could be nothing, but you know I couldn't tell you over the phone."

"I know."

"Just keep a low profile, got it?"

"Yes," she said soberly.

"Now, do you want some mac and cheese while you're here? I can't say I had a real plan for dinner so that's all I've got."

At that, El smiled, just the slightest bit. "Sure."

El tried to relax in her father's company for the next couple of hours. They watched a short movie while they ate. He was kind, not pushy, and didn't really pry over her feelings on the matter, which was nice because it allowed her for a moment to forget that it was happening.

But it all came rushing back the second that she walked out of the cabin door to go home. It all felt heavy, too heavy. Instead of walking to her car, her feet dragged her in another direction under the waning haze of twilight. She found what she was looking for easily, and just as it always did, it brought her the tiniest bit of calm.

It was what she always did when something was on her mind: a wander through the trees of her father's land. The lush overgrowth always felt like a comfort. It helped her clear her thoughts in order to lay out plans. It was the best she'd been able to do when she'd been young. The trees had provided the only alternate experience to the inside of the cabin during her two years in hiding. Plus, the fresh air and green had always seemed so precious after a lifetime indoors.

She'd kept up the habit as her boundaries had grown, until a tiny well worn path had appeared throughout the woods' expanse from years of her pacing. Her little private trail started from the left side of the cabin. It meandered through the trees to the left and wound its way up the tiny hill at the far end of the property. Finally, it cut back, following the tree line beside the sparsely used road, her foot falls weaving in and out of the trunks along the aligning ditch toward the gravel driveway and beyond.

She'd pattered through her thoughts on her little trail countless times. In the cold. In the snow. On windy days and sunny days. And on one occasion, while trapped within a storm.

Though she loathed the memory, she couldn't help but think about it every time that she passed the mailbox. And even if she'd succeeded in shaking it herself, her father would never let it fully slip from her memory.

El wasn't sure what had been on her mind that night. Her upcoming move to Indianapolis, maybe? The odd sensation of what life would be like when she was living on her own? She was never sure. But she had found herself deeply lost in thought as the sun disappeared and the sky turned black. So lost in thought, in fact, that she hadn't registered the approach of a storm. In her defense, it had crashed out of nowhere that night, and with a sudden torrent, it had opened straight down upon her. She'd stopped in place, right up against the largest tree near the driveway, at the spot where the ditch ended and the flat surface leading from the road to the driveway began. Hair matting quickly to her face, she sheltered under the large branches to chart the quickest path to rush back to the house.

Yet, before she could take a step, the screeching of tires had blared harsh in her ears. She'd spun around right as the lights of a car tilted and rounded upon her, careening in her direction at an uncontrolled and breakneck speed. Not just toward her, but toward the massive tree that the car was truly no match for.

Her reaction had almost been instinctual. Almost. When she thought about it later, she couldn't deny that something in her had felt an urgency bigger than herself. An urgency for them, whoever they were, barreling toward her and the tree like a train flown off of the rails.

That urgency had coursed through her, making her push too hard and too fast. The sensation of the hood crushing in on itself was so intense that she could have convinced herself that she'd done it with her own hand. The car halted immediately, stopped by her power. From its crushed hood shot a soft thread of smoke. She froze, hand in the air, rain spattering her sight within the blinding headlights. And for a split second she forgot... it was only she who was blind.

The shock of being seen, hand throwing power through the air, blood upon her nose, still made her body run cold with fear over three years later.

El shook her head as the memory flashed fresh. That was old history, she reminded herself. Years of silence had proven that there was no need for her to worry about that person. She was sure that her father had gotten to the bottom of the incident, or at least that he had tried, but she had resolved to never ask. She didn't want to know. Honestly, she wanted to forget.

She only hoped that the person, or persons, were okay, and that they'd been confused enough to not connect the dots.

Maybe they hadn't even seen her at all...

El left the memory behind, the concept of that night feeling just a little too fresh with the news she had just learned. She got in her car and headed home right as the sky turned to black.

I think it looks the same? Maybe? It's a little hard to tell. Can you get another picture?

Mike bit his lip in frustration at Mrs. Byers's text reply. The truth was, he *couldn't* get another picture. He'd already jumped through so many hoops to get Dustin to drive him to Thelma's for dinner without it being suspicious. He'd had to sneak away, saying he was going to the bathroom, only to slip into the game room instead. The old wood paneled room hadn't been cleaned since the incident the past week. The seared Contra machine was still in the middle of the room. Just as Mrs. Byers had explained but Mike hadn't noticed that night, the lights on the ceiling had in fact exploded. Some of them had, anyway. He could only reach one close enough to take a picture, the ceiling being too high even for his long arms to easily reach.

But clearly, the picture hadn't been good enough.

He knew where he could get a much better picture. At a much better height. But he *really* didn't want to do that.

But as he pulled back, questioning his potential actions, he could only see El, bleary eyed with blood dripping from her nose, holding her head, in pain.

Maybe it would be worth it.

That got him back out the door at midnight, and a laser focus that brought him marching straight to her home.

He gulped as he stopped at the thin walkway to her door. Her house was dark, no lights on at all, and it gave him a bit of relief. He moved as quietly and slowly as he could, hands shaking against his phone with his camera open. He was grateful for the burnt out porch lights, for they concealed his totally invasive movements. Praying that he would go unnoticed, because it would be potential relationship suicide to be found on her front porch unawares at 12:30 at night, Mike stepped gingerly onto the tiny patio and moved to the left where one of the sconces, or what was left of it anyway, was at his eye level. With a grimace, he lifted his phone and held his breath. His finger pushed to take the picture. The delay of the flash made his stomach roil. He winced as the bright light flashed into the empty and broken socket, illuminating his location for the most split of seconds.

It was going to have to do, one picture, because this was -
-the light in the kitchen flickered on.

Light flooded the patio from the window on his right.

Shit! he mouthed silently as his arms and legs clumsily pulled away and tripped on a planter that he hadn't even noticed by his feet. It crashed off of the patio and onto the cement below, cracking loudly.

He didn't stay behind to see if there was any more movement. His long legs were good for one thing: running away as fast as he could.

El pushed herself deeper against the wall for her kitchen, her heart in her throat. She held her breath even though it hurt to do so. Edging her way against the wall, she finally pulled up the courage to look

out of the curtain. She could not see anything on the patio. Letting out her breath, she slid down the wall, tears edging at her eyes.

That had not been a cat. The movements were not lithe and small. They sounded like the size of a human. On her front porch. After midnight. Making flashes. Then running away...

The files pulled at the public records office in Hawkins didn't feel like a fluke anymore.

El fought back a strangled cry.

She knew, in her gut, somehow... someone had found her...

Thanks so much to those of you that have left comments recently! It's been so great to hear from all of you and what you're thinking about this. Just a couple chapters left!